

**Changes and challenges in the face of digital disruptions at  
community print newspapers of Boland Media and WP Media:  
Perspectives from the newsroom**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Community print newspapers in South Africa have not been immune to the consequences of the digital disruption on the media landscape in general and the print media industry in particular. While research has been conducted on the changes and challenges the digital disruption has caused in the print media industry, there is a lack of research on how this phenomenon has affected the newsrooms of community print newspapers in South Africa. This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach as theoretical framework to examine the changes and challenges journalists working at community print newspapers in South Africa experience in their newsrooms. Interviews were conducted with nine community journalists from a number of community newspapers published in the Western Cape by Boland Media and WP Media. The researcher explored their experiences with and perspectives on changes and challenges in the newsroom, the way these journalists function in an online environment, the role of community newspapers in the communities they serve, the quality of community newspapers in South Africa as well as what the participants in this study believe the future may hold for these publications. The researcher found that while there are in fact a number of changes and challenges present in the participants' newsrooms, this does not hamper their passion for or quality of their work.

## Opsomming

Gemeenskapskoerante in Suid-Afrika is, soos die res van die drukmediabedryf en die algehele medialandskap, beïnvloed deur die ontwrigting wat die uitbreiding van digitale media in die medialandskap veroorsaak het. Terwyl daar reeds navorsing oor die gevolge hiervan op die drukmediabedryf oor die algemeen gedoen is, is daar 'n gebrek aan navorsing oor wat die gevolge vir die nuuskantore by Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskapskoerante was. Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie fokus op die veranderinge en uitdagings wat die uitbreiding van digitale media in die nuuskantore van Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskapskoerante meegebring het. Die studie het fenomenologie as teoretiese raamwerk gebruik. Data is ingesamel deur middel van onderhoude wat gevoer is met nege joernaliste van gemeenskapskoerante wat in die Wes-Kaap deur Boland Media en WP Media gepubliseer word. Die navorser het die veranderinge en uitdagings in die nuuskantore, die manier hoe hierdie joernaliste in 'n digitale omgewing funksioneer, die rol van die publikasies in die gemeenskappe wat hulle dien, die kwaliteit van die publikasies en die toekoms van gemeenskapskoerante in Suid-Afrika verken. Die navorser het bevind dat alhoewel die joernaliste wat aan die studie deelgeneem het verskeie veranderinge en uitdagings in hul nuuskantore ervaar, hulle nie glo dat dit die kwaliteit van hul publikasies of hul passie vir hul werk belemmer nie.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Personal motivation for this study

During my time working as a journalist at *Eikestadnuus*, a community print newspaper owned by Media24 which focuses on news from the greater Stellenbosch area, I realised what an important role the publication plays in the community it serves. As Franklin, Hamer, Hanna, Kinsey and Richardson (2005:134) put it, community print newspapers, which focus on news from and information aimed at specific communities, contribute positively to not only their readers' lives, but also to the functioning of democracy at large because they are one of the few available sources of hyperlocal news which informs, educates and entertains their readers with content from their own communities. During my time at this publication, I experienced a number of changes, which altered the environment I had to work in, and also presented challenges, which frequently made it difficult for me to perform my various roles as a community journalist.

The phenomena which caused the biggest upheavals in my work environment were digital disruptions, understood for the purpose of this research project as the changes in the media landscape caused by the introduction of new digital technologies and business models (TechTarget, 2019). In 2018, the evolving environment and difficulties it presented culminated in me deciding to leave the publication to join the online platform of *Landbouweekblad*, a publication focused on news from the South African agricultural sector. Shortly after interviewing for the position at this publication at the end of last year, a meeting was convened with the staff at *Eikestadnuus* (2018) where it was announced that the publication would become a free weekly print publication in order to save the financial well-

being of the publication by increasing its circulation. This announcement went hand in hand with a reduction in the number of staff members to cut costs and a sense of uncertainty about the publication's future.

Though I am no longer a community journalist, I am still interested to determine how the general trends in the print media have affected other community print publications and the journalists who work there. By exploring the perspectives and experiences of journalists working at community print publications, specifically those published by Media24's Boland Media, a publisher of community print newspapers in the Western Cape's Boland area, and WP Media, a publisher of community print newspapers in the northern and southern suburbs of Cape Town in the Western Cape, I hope to learn more about the changes and challenges they experience as well as their views on the future of community print newspapers.

## **1.2. Research problem**

Community print newspapers, such as the titles published by Media24's Boland Media and WP Media, fulfil an important role, but are under threat from digital disruptions which have led to changes and challenges, such as shrinking editorial teams and declining circulation, for community print journalists. The problem is that not much is known about the extent of these changes and challenges at Boland Media and WP Media, how they impact these journalists' ability to perform their various roles, such as providing their readers with valuable information, or how they could potentially influence the future of community print journalism. This researcher will explore the perspectives and views of journalists working at community print newspapers at Boland Media and WP Media in order to establish what type of and to what extent they have experienced changes and challenges at their publications,

how it has affected the way they function and what they think are possible solutions to the challenges they face. In doing so, this researcher will contribute to a field of study which has received limited academic attention and provide insight into a sector in the media which fulfils an important role in society and the functioning of democracy.

### **1.3. Background**

Though the digitisation of the media may have amplified the most recent upheavals in print media, such as community print newspapers, it is by no means the first time the industry has been confronted with changes and challenges (Brock, 2013:1-4). Structural changes, instability and the challenges associated with having to function in a fluctuating work environment have been present at print newspapers long before the digitisation of the media (Franklin et al., 2005:135). Media24, one of South Africa's biggest media companies and the largest publisher of community print newspapers in Africa thanks to the 50 print titles it publishes (FP&M SETA, 2014), has not been immune to these changes. Like its competitors in the market, such as Independent News and Media, Avusa and Caxton, Media24 says it is focused on expanding and strengthening their digital offering while also maintaining the wellbeing of its print titles (Weideman, 2016).

The digitisation of the media has been described as the most far-reaching technical innovation in journalism and a phenomenon which has revolutionised newsroom practices and led to a completely new publishing platform by reducing information to a constant stream of data (Franklin et al., 2005:60). This policy of digitisation has been extended to the Media24 News division with daily print editions such as *Die Burger* having to transfer almost

its entire editorial team to Netwerk24, one of the company's digital platforms (Media24, 2017) which was established in 2014 and currently has 52 000 subscribers (Loubser, 2019).

Former Media24 CEO Esmaré Weideman (2016), who retired at the end of September 2018, stated in an email sent to staff that the company is “committed to our digital future and continue to drive the migration of our audiences and advertisers from print to digital platforms and focus on mobile product innovation”. She went on to express her enthusiasm for digital media as follows:

Our digital media properties are really pumping. This does not mean that print is not important – some of our titles remain highly profitable and play a vital role in the South African media landscape. An increasing amount of resources are also being diverted to the digital platforms in an attempt to strengthen their online presence and potential for generating revenue. (Weideman, 2016)

Media24 continues to maintain a digital-first policy and most of the new media products and innovations presented by the company are digital media products and innovations such as new apps and websites (Media24, 2019). Ishmet Davidson, who succeeded Weideman and is the current CEO of Media24 Print Media, announced further restructuring at this division with the integration of Netwerk24 and their Afrikaans newspapers into a new division called Afrikaans News. According to an email sent to staff at Media24, this integration is the second phase of their strategic journey to become “a smaller, more profitable media business with a significant investment in ecommerce” (Davidson, 2019). Davidson (2019) explains further:

... [T]he resulting irreversible structural decline in print revenues and advertising revenues under pressure all round, we knew this journey would not be smooth sailing all the way. We believe this integration and the new structure for our Afrikaans news operations will facilitate the carefully coordinated transition of our business and publishing models from print to digital by streamlining our editorial and commercial operations to minimise print losses, while further stimulating digital subscriber and advertising growth and profitability.

A number of the changes and challenges in the media were discussed on 29 June 2018, when members of the Forum of Community Journalists (FCJ), an organisation which strives to promote and express the interests of all journalists employed at regional community newspapers, magazines and online community publications in South Africa (FCJ, 2018), met in Centurion for the organisation's annual general meeting. The guest speaker at the meeting was Pieter du Toit, editor-in-chief of Huffington Post SA, an international news and opinion website published locally by Media24 until the middle of 2018, when the partnership ended because expected advertising revenues from the website were not realised (Media24, 2018). Journalists from Boland Media and WP Media, both subdivisions of Media24 News who publish community print newspapers, were also present at the meeting.

Du Toit was at the FCJ meeting to talk to the journalists about the changes and challenges the digital disruption has created in the media industry and how it affects community print journalists. According to Du Toit (2018) there are a number of ways in which journalists in community print media are in a more favourable position than their colleagues working in

digital media. He argued that community journalists have a better relationship with their readers while most mass news outlets have become removed from the communities they serve (Du Toit, 2018). This relationship is, according to him (Du Toit, 2018), possibly one of the biggest advantages community print newspapers have:

The strongest bonds between the media and the communities they serve, I would argue, is between [community print] titles and the communities [they] operate in. Websites are much too grey and devoid of personality. People can't identify with them. We are struggling to create something that they can identify with or relate to.

He blames this apparent estrangement on the way the news environment has changed, making it more difficult for journalists to get away from their newsrooms, which are more often than not high-pressure environments where work has to be done at a fast pace (Du Toit, 2018). He also pointed out that the economic pressures experienced by newspapers, including community print newspapers, have caused newsrooms to become decimated as staff cutbacks are made in an attempt to save money, leading to a shortage of not only staff, but also essential skills (Du Toit, 2018). This, he believes, has caused a crisis in the media, because not only is the industry losing skilled journalists, but it has also become a rather unappealing place for the next generation of journalists “which we will need to help unravel this web of corruption which has been weaved in South Africa” (Du Toit, 2018).

The impression that newsrooms at community print newspapers have, according to Du Toit (2018), become unattractive to new journalists is one of the biggest problems, because he

believes they are the best places for young reporters to “cut your teeth” and learn to cover stories with the necessary depth and context (Du Toit, 2018). For this reason, he considers community print newspapers to not only be important for the functioning of democracy and local communities, but also the functioning of the media as a whole (Du Toit, 2018). Views like these create uncertainty about the future of community print newspapers which, according to Shafer (2016), continue to be the best source of information “about the workings of government, of industry, and of the major institutions that dominate our lives”.

The economic problem facing the media is one that cannot be ignored. Advertisers who were supposed to migrate from print media to digital media along with news outlets never showed up and as a result both print and digital publications are struggling to make ends meet (Du Toit, 2018). As Du Toit (2018) puts it:

The new business model is broken and the old one has died.

Even though it could be possible that the business side of print publications could recover in the future, Chisholm (2010:19) argues that journalism will suffer and that journalists will have to become more involved in the business side of their publications.

One of the biggest challenges, Du Toit (2018) argued, is maintaining readers’ trust and the value of publications’ brand despite economic difficulties and the onslaught of modern phenomena such as fake news. Even more important than this is the protection of traditional news values which community print journalists still have and the reason why Du Toit (2018) considers their publications as “the embodiment of what we try to be as journalists”. Esme



Smit, general manager at Boland Media, says despite the importance of being profitable and some readers migrating to online media, the company's biggest priority is to maintain editorial quality (Smit, 2018). There are a number of factors which make that easier said than done, however, and the business side of running a community print newspaper has a lot to do with it (Smit, 2018):

The consumer is under economic pressure which affects our copy sales while advertisers migrate to cheaper online options which again puts pressure on our publication. Offering a full bouquet of print and online marketing solutions to our direct clients is a huge challenge. Circulation income and advertising revenue remain our economic drivers and our main challenge.

Boland Media and WP Media's editorial teams focus on the production of their weekly community print newspapers and the maintenance of their digital platforms, such as their pages on Netwerk24, Media24's Afrikaans news website, and News24, the company's biggest English news website. As they form part of a company and an industry which has already experienced changes and challenges, they are not immune to the changes and challenges functioning in the modern media landscape entails.

#### **1.4. Literature review**

Hare (2018) writes that there are a number of "universal truths" people assume about community newspapers. She identifies three specific assumptions: community newspapers

are critical to protecting democracy, the journalists working at community newspapers are passionate about what they do, and these publications are in crisis because of digital disruptions (Hare, 2018). According to her, those are not the only areas of study and research at community newspapers. Hare (2018) proposes that studies should also focus on the experiences and perceptions of journalists working at these publications. Some of the aspects of working at a community newspaper she feels are more worthy of deeper investigation, is how the functioning of newsrooms have changed (Hare, 2018). She suggests enquiring about these journalists' willingness to work exceptionally hard for relatively low wages and getting most of their satisfaction from the positive changes they encourage in their community (Hare, 2018). She also argues it is essential to determine whether journalists feel their newspapers have mastered ways to incorporate digital media in their functioning while also coming to grips with the altering nature and needs of their audience (Hare, 2018).

Previous studies on changes and challenges at community print newspapers confirm that while they still serve an important purpose, their newsrooms have not been immune to technological, economic and cultural changes which have necessitated a reconsideration of how these publications are structured (Pickard & Stearns, 2011:46). The expected pay-off for having a digital presence has also not been realised for community print newspapers, according to Carey (2014:129), as these publications' readers rarely interact with them online. The opportunity of having an audience online is, according to Gilligan (2011:69), more of a possibility than a reality at community print newspapers.

It is, however, unknown exactly how journalists working at community print newspapers in South Africa have experienced and perceived changes to their work environment and the various challenges they cause. Some studies (Mudhai, 2011; Duncan, 2017; Garman & Van

der Merwe, 2017; Wasserman, 2017) have been conducted on how the rise of digital media has changed, and in some cases disrupted, the media landscape in South Africa, on the African continent and globally. Studies on how changes and challenges such as the digital disruption and the alignment with a digital-first policy have affected community newspapers and journalists in South Africa, however, are in short supply. Preliminary research on a number of databases (*Google Scholar*, *SAGE Journals*, *JStor*, *Taylor and Francis Online*, the *Worlds of Journalism Study* as well as Stellenbosch University library) has indicated that, at the time of writing, there has been very limited research (see Verweij, 2009; Bosch, 2010) conducted on the changes and challenges at print publications in South Africa beyond the decline of revenue and circulation. Even less has been written on the changes and challenges at community print newspapers in South Africa (Zazini, 2003; Meissenheimer, 2006). Though some of these studies contain valuable insights which are applicable to the topic of this research project, none of them deal with the perspectives of community print journalists working at community print newspapers in South Africa.

This research project will use the available studies on the changes and challenges at community print news publications and print news publications in general as caused by digital disruptions to provide context. The themes which will be explored using the available literature are the changes and challenges in print media in general (Brock, 2013, Franklin et al., 2005; Hare, 2018) as well as the function and relevance of community print newspapers in the communities they serve (Chung, 2009; Hansen & Hansen, 2011; Jeffres & Kumar, 2014; Reader, 2018), the changes and challenges associated with adjusting to functioning in an online environment (Gilligan, 2011; Hunt, Atkin & Kowal, 2013; Carey, 2014; Speakman, 2019), how the digital disruption influenced the quality of journalism in South African newsrooms (Findlay, Bird & Smith, 2017) and how these changes and challenges could shape

community newspapers' future (Chisholm, 2010; Pickard & Stearns, 2011; Terry, 2011) will also be explored. These studies will be discussed in more detail as part of the literature review (Chapter 2).

### **1.5. Problem statement and focus**

Community print newspapers in South Africa have been faced with a number of changes and challenges in the past and are now also confronted by the digital disruption of the media which further amplifies the problems the industry face. The goal of this research project is to explore the challenges and changes present from a newsroom perspective at a selection of community print newspapers at two companies belonging to Media24. Not much research has been done on the South African community press or these companies, specifically how journalists perceive the changes and challenges they experience in their work environment.

This researcher has chosen to focus on Boland Media and WP Media because they are two of the leading publishers of community print newspapers in the Western Cape and their newsrooms were accessible to the researcher. The two companies are similar. Firstly, both these companies have both print and online editions as well as other digital platforms, such as Facebook, that have to be maintained. Secondly, journalists working at these companies have the same working condition – both these companies form part of Media24, both these companies publish newspapers on a weekly basis and both these companies have to function within the same atmosphere of uncertainty about their print edition's future.

## **1.6. Goals and research questions**

The goal of the study is to gain insight and understanding into the experiences and perceptions of community journalists at Boland Media and WP Media against the backdrop of digital disruption.

### **1.6.1. Research questions**

This study aims to answer the following key research question: What are the changes and challenges journalists at Boland Media and WP Media' community newspapers experience in their newsrooms?

In order to answer the main research question, the following specific questions will be used to gain insight into how journalists view these changes and challenges at Boland Media and WP Media (see Addendum A for the complete list of questions):

- What are the journalists' experiences of the ways the newsroom as well as the way it functions have changed since they started working at their various publications?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their role in the communities they serve and what challenges have they experienced in attempting to fulfil this role?
- What are the journalists' views on the increasing pressure to remain profitable and the way this has affected the editorial quality of community print newspapers?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their relationship and interaction with the communities they serve?
- What are the journalists' views on the future of community print newspapers?

## 1.7. Theoretical framework

In order to describe the experiences and perceptions of community journalists at Boland Media and WP Media, the researcher has chosen to use phenomenology as the theoretical framework for this research project.

Phenomenology, a term originally coined by philosopher Edmund Husserl, is a qualitative research approach used to explore and interpret individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2007:59; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009:11). A study which employs this approach does not aim to prove any hypotheses, but rather to explore and interpret journalists' experiences through the study of phenomena (Hussey & Hussey, 1997:52).

The underlying proposition of phenomenology is that reality is a structure which consists of meanings individuals attribute to it (Fourie, 2007:146). According to this perspective, "what we experience as 'the world' or 'reality' is constituted by common-sense knowledge and taken-for-granted interpretations" (Fourie, 2007:146). The goal of research conducted from this perspective, is to identify principles and shared assumptions which underlie individuals' perception or interpretation of reality.

Tandoc and Takahashi (2016:6) believes phenomenology "encourages a focus on how journalists make meanings out of what they do and what they experience while engaged in their journalistic practice" by exploring influences on their routines and outputs.

A phenomenological perspective has been used by a number of researchers in journalism studies wishing to understand the experiences and perceptions of journalists. Markham

(2011) used a phenomenological perspective to explore journalists' experiences with war reporting. Feinstein, Wanga and Owen (2015) studied the psychological effects of reporting on extreme violence in Kenya and also chose to use a phenomenological perspective. Kartveit (2017) also employed this perspective in order to study journalists' perception of multimedia journalism as a practice. Zuydam (2019) used a phenomenological perspective to explore how science journalist in South Africa perceive the current state of affairs in South African science journalism.

## **1.8. Research methodology and design**

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology the researcher chose to explore the changes and challenges in community journalism in South Africa. The researcher chose to undertake a study which is qualitative in nature and focuses on exploring and interpreting the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study. In this chapter, the researcher motivates why she chose this method, specifically conducting interviews with the participants in this study.

While quantitative research restricts itself to data and rejects any form of speculation (Du Plooy, 2009:22), a qualitative approach focuses on "understanding particular situations, rather than generalising findings" (Du Plooy, 2009:34). It has become a popular approach for studies conducted in the field of social sciences (Leedy & Ormond, 2005:133) such as sociology, which aims to understand the relationship between people, institutions and structures (Fourie, 2007:113).

The goal of this researcher's study is to understand how journalists working at community print newspapers experience changes and challenges in their industry and is thus in keeping with the aims of sociological research projects.

## **1.9. Chapter layout**

The chapter layout is as follows:

**Chapter 1:** This chapter describes the researcher's personal motivation for undertaking the study, outlines the research problem and focus, and provides a brief overview of the literature on the subject as well as the problem statement, goals of the study, research questions and chapter outline.

**Chapter 2:** This chapter provides a literature review of previous studies conducted on the changes and challenges experienced at community newspapers and the print media industry in general.

**Chapter 3:** This chapter discusses phenomenology, the theoretical departure point for this study. In order to describe the experiences and perceptions of community journalists at Boland Media and WP Media companies, the researcher has chosen to use phenomenology as her theoretical framework.

**Chapter 4:** This chapter discusses the research design and methodology for this study. The researcher has chosen to employ a qualitative research design which aims to accomplish an in-depth exploration of the experiences of the participants in the study through interviews.



**Chapter 5:** This chapter will report the data analysis and research findings for this study.

**Chapter 6:** This chapter will offer a discussion of the results and conclusion drawn from this study. It will also discuss recommendations which flow from this study, as well as possible topics for future studies.

### **1.10. Summary**

The researcher hopes to provide valuable information about the changes and challenges caused by the digital disruption at community print newspapers in South Africa which provides departure points for future research. The main aim is to identify the most prominent changes and challenges according to the participants in this research project who have first-hand experience in this regard. In this introductory chapter, the researcher outlines the backdrop against which this research project is undertaken and how it will contribute to the field of community journalism in South Africa.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

As stated in Chapter 1, there are a limited number of studies on how changes and challenges such as the digital disruption and the alignment with a digital-first policy have affected community newspapers in South Africa. None of the available literature reviewed by the researcher focuses on the changes and challenges the digital disruption has caused in the newsrooms of South African community print newspapers.

A number of authors have conducted research on the same themes presented by Shafer (2016), Du Toit (2018) and Smit (2018) in chapter 1, namely the changes and challenges in print media in general, the function and relevance of community print newspapers in the communities they serve, the changes and challenges associated with adjusting to functioning in an online environment, how the digital disruption influenced the quality of journalism in South African and how these changes and challenges could shape community newspapers' future. This literature will be reviewed in this chapter to establish what research has already been done on these themes and which gaps in existing research need to be addressed.

### **2.1. General changes and challenges in the print media industry**

As is the case in other countries in the world, digital journalism has been practiced in South Africa for some time and is not a new phenomenon (Bosch, 2010:265). According to Franklin et al. (2005:135), the digitisation of the media is not the first upheaval in the traditional print media industry and a number of changes and challenges preceded it. A decline in circulation, the birth of free newspapers, the use of advertorials instead of news and the dwindling size of editorial teams are the biggest issues they point out (Franklin et al., 2005:135). In South

Africa, circulation of daily newspapers decreased with 12.6% during 2015, while the circulation of weekly papers decreased with 6.4% and weekend newspapers' circulation declined by 11.6% (Jenkins, 2017). Bosch (2010:266) believes that in the South African context, the juniorisation of newsrooms as well as an overreliance on press releases are the biggest challenges.

Brock (2013:1) argues that the changes and challenges have necessitated changes in the way journalists in the print media go about their craft. Traditional print publications in South Africa took varied approaches to do so. *The Sunday Times*, a weekly newspaper, launched a separate online edition as well as a new daily print edition with the same content, *The Times*, which was only available to *The Sunday Times* subscribers (Verweij, 2009:77). Along with the new editions, a revamped newsroom with a new workflow system and structure which dedicated journalists to either the website or print publication (Verweij, 2009:78).

Verweij (2009:80) argues changes made at *Die Burger*, one of the oldest print newspapers in South Africa owned by Media24, is an excellent example of how a publication adjusted its structure to produce multimedia content. After the publication aligned itself with a digital first policy, a team dedicated to producing multimedia stories was established and the workflow adjusted in order for the publication's print edition and website to function in tandem (Verweij, 2009:80-81). *Die Burger* no longer has its own website and its online content is published on Netwerk24. Willem Pretorius, an assistant editor at *Die Burger* at the time, said that the company intended to roll out this model to its community newspapers as well (Verweij, 2009:81).

Verweij (2009:87) concludes that these changes not only enabled journalists at *Die Burger* to tell stories in a new way, but also gave the publications readers the opportunity to be informed by and involved in their stories. Most of *Die Burger*'s editorial team has since been transferred to Netwerk24 (Media24, 2017), one of Media24's digital platform which pools together all the websites of the Afrikaans titles published by this company.

This researcher could, however, not find any proof that a digital policy such as the policy implemented at *Die Burger* has since been implemented at Media24's community newspapers which means that though efforts have been made to enable other publications in the Media24 News group to adapt to functioning in an increasingly digitised media landscape, the community newspapers' newsrooms could continue to be structured and subsequently function the same way they always have. This study aims to establish to what extent and how the structure and functioning of community print newspapers' newsrooms have changed.

According to Brock (2013:2) the reason why the disruption of journalism should be a matter of concern to people who live in democratic societies, is because this disruption could affect the integrity of journalism which underwrites many of the values essential to such societies:

Journalism is an idea and a set of values. Ideas are worthless if they cannot be put into practice; in this, strong journalism institutions are important. (Brock, 2013:3)

Brock (2013:4) argues that changes and challenges in the print media industry occurred before the digital disruption thanks to inventions such as the telegraph, radio and television, which reshaped communication between the news media and public (Brock, 2013:83).

The internet, however, is the invention which according to Brock (2013:84) unleashed to most disruptive change and though it was initially treated as a new publishing system, later introduced cycles of disruption in the news media industry. Brock (2013: 85-87) lists an increase in the amount of information as well as the networks available to distribute it, an increase in the interactivity between the consumers and manufacturers of news, the birth of user generated content (UGC) and the splintering of the conversation thanks to social media platforms such as Facebook as some of the biggest changes caused by the internet.

The researcher offers more insight on how community print journalists in South Africa approach the large amount of information available on the internet through this study.

The most immediate effect of the increasing role of the internet in news media, was the exacerbation of the business problems faced by print media publications' business model that relies on income generated through advertising (Brock, 2013:89). He points out that specifically community print newspapers, which depend on the income generated through their classified section, suffered because of this (Brock, 2013:93):

The internet has almost no restrictions on space, so it was quickly possible to assemble larger quantities of ads in one place, which could be instantly and painlessly searched.

Along with the dwindling income from advertising, the circulation of print news publications dropped as young readers buy less newspapers and even loyal print newspapers readers become consumers of online content (Brock, 2013:94). According to Brock (2013:99) the decrease in circulation is one of the biggest shocks experienced in newsrooms, especially newsrooms at community print newspapers who believed they had a monopoly over the local readers. This has ultimately resulted in fewer reporters being employed, less training is being provided and a reduction in the amount of original content they produce (Brock, 2013:99).

The researcher could not find any existing studies on how the digitisation of the media has affected the revenue and circulation of community print newspapers in South Africa and addresses this gap in literature through her own study.

Though journalists have realised the extent of the changes and challenges caused by the digital disruption of the media, they have been reluctant to adapt in order to survive, as Brock (2013:92) puts it:

Journalists, who often lectured politicians and businesspeople on the need for adaptability and openness to change, mostly did no better: they were in favour of change in theory, provided that in practice it affected someone else.

This is why some media commentators have held journalists, who tend to have rigid ideas about how journalism should be done, as responsible as managers in the media industry for its failure to adapt to changes and challenges (Brock, 2013:148).

The researcher could not find any literature on how journalists at community print newspapers in South Africa approach adapting to changes and challenges in their newsrooms. This study offers more insight on how journalists at community print newspapers in South Africa do so.

## **2.2. The relevance and role of community print newspapers**

According to Reader (2018) researchers often forget that weekly community print newspapers make up the vast majority of printed newspapers, for example countries like the United States where weekly community print newspapers make up 70 percent of all newspapers. In South Africa, weekly community print newspapers also make up the majority of the more than 60 newspapers published by Media24 (2019). Jenkin (2017) states that though South African daily newspapers experienced a 12,6 percent decline in circulation during 2015, community newspapers suffered a decline of 7,1 percent during the same period.

Irma Green, the national group editor of Caxton Local Newspapers, one of the largest publishing companies in South Africa, believes community print newspapers function as “village noticeboards” where journalists tackle the issues that the readers the most, but are also considered the driving force behind a number of fundraisers and other social initiatives (Jenkin, 2017). Green adds that community newspapers are not only viewed as a “voice” for its readers, but also the publication where they can find hyperlocal content and determine a price benchmark to ensure the competitiveness of local traders (Jenkin, 2017).

Jeffres and Kumar (2014:81) argue that community print newspapers fulfil all the traditional roles assigned to the media, which includes “surveillance, correlation, transmission of the social heritage and entertainment”. According to their research, journalists and editors at community newspapers believe that though the traditional functions remain important, their watchdog function has become more elaborate (Jeffres & Kumar, 2014:90-91). They argue that “serving as the public’s watchdog, stimulating civic engagement and developing a sense of community and acting as coordinator and socializing agents” are the three most important functions of community print newspapers in the communities they serve. Jeffres and Kumar (2014:92) argue that the development of new technology has not altered how journalists and editors at community newspapers view their role and functions, but that journalists rather employed this technology to perform them, specifically its coordinating-socialising function.

According to Chung (2009:78) readers’ perception of what a community newspaper’s role and functions are remain the same whether it is published as a print newspaper or an online newspaper. The ranking of what function is the most important does however change (Chung, 2009:78). In an online environment, Chung (2009:78) argues that audiences perceive the populist mobiliser role of community newspapers to be the most important, followed by their interpretive and disseminator roles. The audience perceives the aforementioned as important, because they place a high value on the speed with which news is delivered (Chung, 2009:78).

Community newspapers’ ability to facilitate communication about local issues and their ability to create social cohesion in a community are biggest reasons why community newspapers remain relevant in their communities (Hansen & Hansen, 2011:98). They argue that audiences realise the importance of local media and want publications that care about their community, the different groups it is made up of and insight into the problems their



community faces (Hansen & Hansen, 2011:99). The most apparent secret to community newspapers' success, is their emphasis on local news and other hyperlocal content and the bond it creates between them and their readers (Hansen & Hansen, 2011:100). Hansen and Hansen (2011:104) argue that readers are more satisfied with the content such publications offer. Though Du Toit (2018) has doubts about the ability of young journalists, Gilligan (2011:67) argues that community print newspapers should strongly consider having young journalists on the news team in order to update the production of news content to incorporate new media and technology. More experienced journalists, however, remain vital to the news team as they are better equipped to ensure the content appeals to their readers (Gilligan, 2011:67).

Establishing the relevance and role of South African community print newspapers in the communities they serve is one of the main aims of this study.

### **2.3. Functioning in an online environment**

Except for the general changes and challenges in the print media industry Brock (2013) refers to, the most prominent changes and challenges community print newspapers experience with functioning in an online environment, is the various new ways they interact with and reach their audience (Gilligan, 2011; Hunt, Atkin & Kowal, 2013; Carey, 2014; Speakman, 2019).

According to Speakman (2019:1), interaction with their audiences is a challenge which is relevant to community newspapers specifically because just like Web 2.0 was initially developed to facilitate interaction, journalists working at community newspapers strive to

develop relationships with their audience to bolster a sense of community not only between the readers, but also between the publication and its readers.

Hunt et al. (2013:64-65) and Gilligan (2011:69) argue that the various interactive features found on online media platforms could be conducive to community newspapers' ability to create a sense of community among their readers and strengthen their "community attachment", the connection they have with their audience. Hunter et al. (2013:72-73) argue that the value of interactive features made available to community newspapers when functioning in an online space should not be underestimated because it can be used to determine not only the level of satisfaction and loyalty among their readers, but also attract younger readers. Another reason why Hunter et al. (2013:73) believe in fostering community attachment is because it is an indication of how the audience perceives a publication's credibility. They explain it as follows (Hunter et al., 2013:73):

Community attachment, perhaps due to an increased familiarity with the people and events in the news, influences how trustworthy, believable and honest the newspaper is perceived to be. In community journalism, newspaper organisations would benefit from understanding how their readers rate their credibility. This is becoming more important in the current new media environment, where competition from other online news and information sources is becoming more readily available.

Facebook has proven to be one of the most popular social media platforms with more than 2,37 billion users worldwide in 2018. An estimated 139 million user are from Africa and 98%

of these users access the Facebook website via their cell phones (Forbes, 2018). Of these users, more than 16 million reside in South Africa, 5,5 million of them aged between 25 and 34 (Napoleon Cat, 2019). Community newspapers with social media platforms thus have access to a number of readers, including younger readers.

Hunter et al. (2013:73) and Speakman (2019) argue utilising community attachment together with the competitive advantage community newspapers have in terms of reaching specific readers would be a useful skill for community newspapers to harness, because it would enable them to keep their readers on their online platforms instead of visiting other websites offering similar content. According to Speakman (2019), however, journalists have been slow to embrace this potentially higher level of interactivity, because they are unwilling to converse directly with their audience on online platforms. This is due to insufficient time to do so as well as concerns about the tone of the reactions they would get from their readers (Speakman, 2019:3). Despite journalists leaving their readers to mostly interact with each other on their publications' online platforms, this interaction still creates a sense of community online and creates an opportunity for community newspapers to get feedback from their audience (Speakman, 2019:3-4).

Gilligan (2011:63) believes the interactive features offered on online media platforms not only creates the ability for community newspapers, but also the opportunity to expand their reach and grow their audience. This is due to how the definition of what a community is changes in an online environment from a group of people who live in the same geographical area to a group of people who share the same interests or prefer the same content (Gilligan, 2011:64). Gilligan (2011:64) argues online media platforms could also help community newspapers to maintain the readership of the younger members of their audience who are

used to functioning in an online environment and may eventually change location but still be interested in stories from their hometown.

Carey (2014:119), however, argues that though functioning in an online space affords community print newspapers an opportunity to reach their readers in new ways and also grow their audience, they are usually too small with too little resources to do so. During a study on the online discussions which took place on the Facebook posts of 10 community print newspapers in America, he found that interactivity was rare and even the newspapers with the most interactive posts only achieved small amounts of interactivity (Carey, 2014:129). Carey (2014:119) argues there are ways community newspapers can increase interactivity, such as phrasing comments as questions.

Based on the findings of a study Speakman (2019:10) conducted on the influence of technology on the level of interactivity between community newspapers and their readers in an online environment, he argues that community newspapers fail to continue their tradition of interactivity with their audience online and run the risk of alienating themselves from younger readers. Findlay et al. (2017:18) believes this reluctance to interact with readers online hampers community newspapers' ability to not only contribute to public discourse, but also access reach a more diverse audience. Brock (2013:89) believes another reason why journalists are reluctant to interact with their audience online is because this interaction is conducted "according to new rules that neither side entirely understands". Another challenge is establishing whether the audience is sharing your content online because they trust the publication (Brock, 2013:101):

... the measurement of trust and attention – or engagement – on [social] networks, and on the web in general, is in its infancy and will grow much more sophisticated much more quickly.

The migration of readers from community newspapers' printed edition to an online edition and how they use interactive features on online platforms remain two themes Hunter et al. (2013:74) and Shafer (2016) argue need to be researched further.

Except for higher levels of interactivity between publications and their readers, citizen journalism also became a feature in the South African digital media landscape (Bosch, 2010:269). Citizen journalism is defined as citizens or groups of citizens participating in the collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating of news (Bowman and Willis, 2003:10). Bosch (2010:271-272) studied *Thoughtleader*, a blog site on *Mail and Guardian's* website, and MyNews24, a blog site on *News24's* website, as case studies of how online news publications included contributions by their readers into their websites and how these blogs contributed to the formation of public opinion. She found that both local and international readers participated in these online spaces, but that the perspectives expressed by the readers tend to be one-sided and the content on the blogs thus being unbalanced (Bosch, 2010:273). She notes that while a winning formula for combining old and new media in a manner that facilitates greater communication with and participation by readers, access to the technology required to access digital media is not a problem in South Africa (Bosch, 2010:273).

This researcher could not find any literature on how journalists working at community print newspapers experienced this trend, and this aspect is explored in her study.

## **2.4. The quality of journalism in South African newsrooms**

Findlay et al. (2017:3) argue social media and digital technology have not only fundamentally altered the way news is gathered, analysed and distributed, but have also made it challenging to sustain ethical, transparent journalism of high quality. According to them, changes and challenges associated with producing news in the era of digital journalism has the potential to make quality journalism difficult to maintain (Findlay et al., 2017:3):

The changing technological environment has allowed for [a] variety of new pressures to develop (accelerated news cycle, fewer resources, etc.) and each of these has the potential to fuel a range of behaviour changes in the newsrooms that may ultimately weaken traditional forms of gatekeeping and ultimately undermine the very values of ethical and quality journalism the media attempt to uphold.

From interviews conducted with journalists working at South African newsrooms, which adopt different approaches to social media and digital technology, they concluded that digital media and the internet have also altered the way these newsrooms function. The most common challenge they identified during this study, was the resource constraints caused by a shortage of funding or revenue (Findlay et al, 2017:9). The effects from declining revenue were felt most by the participants working at a historically print-only newsroom. Findlay et al. (2017:9) describe the knock-on effects of the declining revenue as follows:

This had led to cutbacks in the newsroom and as a result, staff were overstretched and has less time to do ‘good quality’ stories, follow-ups or stories outside of their primary scope. The idea of ‘fewer hands on deck’ had a marked impact in interviews. This concern over revenue losses and job cuts has been seen across the journalism sector globally, and specifically on traditional print media.

The second most prevalent challenge they encountered, was the large volume of information available online which makes it difficult for participants to keep up with all the stories that require their attention (Findlay et al., 2017:9). Participants not only felt overwhelmed by the amount of information, but also the need to keep up with their competitors and other new media news sources (Findlay et al., 2017:9). According to Findlay et al. (2017:9), the following situation arises because of these challenges:

... the impact of fewer available journalists (because of funding issues) is even more intense given the greater amount of online information that journalists need to sort through, the increased number of stories they are expected to produce as well as the greater amount of effort required (“wow factor”) to make the story stand out in a sea of other stories.

Findlay et al. (2017:20) argue that the increasing pressure experienced by journalists in newsrooms have implication for the quality of their reporting. They struggle to balance “the speed-driven nature of modern news with the need for reliability and rigour in their

investigations” (Findlay et al., 2017:20). This leads to standard practices of quality journalism, such as factchecking, contacting primary sources and following up leads, falling through the cracks and with it not only the accuracy of journalists’ reports (Findlay et al. 2017:20) but also their ability to perform their role as gatekeepers (Findlay et al., 2017:22). According to Findlay et al. (2017:21), the lack of resources journalists face also places a constraint on the amount of time they have available to scrutinise, interpret and explain content to their readers. Some journalists resort to repackaging PR and advertising material and present it as news, making them the “conduits for PR practitioners and advertisers to deliver material to an eager audience under the guise of news” (Findlay et al., 2017:21).

Editors in South African newsrooms are not immune to these changes and challenges as they have to find ways of producing newsworthy content in an industry which is become increasingly commercialised (Findlay et al. 2017:21). Another challenge Findlay et al. (2017) identified, is that editors are expected to include stories trending on social media in their publications, regardless of the stories’ newsworthiness or whether it is in the public interest to cover the story. This trade-off devoting resources and space in the publication to what people seem to be talking about and what they should be talking about further impacts the quality of print publications (Findlay et al., 2017:21). Another challenge editors face, according to Brock (2013:97), is deciding how resources and manpower in the newsroom should be utilised in a way that adds to most value to their publications.

Findlay et al. (2017:22) points out that the internet and other digital media have the potential of helping journalists working in current-day newsrooms to improve the quality of journalism by enabling them to reach a wider audience and create multimedia stories, though how



journalists can make use of this opportunity while performing their other duties under immense pressure still needs to be determined.

Though a number of authors (Chung, 2009; Hansen & Hansen, 2011; Jeffres & Kumar, 2014; Reader, 2018) believe community newspapers perform a vital function in the communities they serve, there is a lack of research on how the digital disruption affected the quality of journalism being practiced in their newsrooms. This research project provides valuable insights into what journalists at Boland Media and WP Media believe the effect of the digital disruption is on the quality of journalism in their newsrooms.

## **2.5. The future of community print newspapers**

Although community print newspapers and the print media industry in general had to endure a number of changes and challenges in their newsrooms, there are authors (Kitch, 2009; Chisholm, 2010; Pickard & Stern, 2011; Terry, 2011; Brock, 2013; Shafer, 2016) who believe print media publications still have a future.

Brock (2013:3) insists that though journalism has changed and will most likely continue to change, it will survive. He believes that instead of enquiring about the future of newspapers and publishers, there should rather be a focus on what will happen to the idea and values of journalism when it finds itself during a period of change (Brock, 2013:3). In order to preserve the ideals of journalism, he argues that journalists will have to learn to adapt quickly to the changes and challenges they experience and find long term solutions for them (Brock, 2013:148). According to him, the four core tasks of journalism, which are verification, sense

making, allowing the public to witness events and investigation, remain the same regardless of whether they are published in print or online (Brock, 2013:201-202).

These four tasks constitute the foundation on which he believes journalism will be rebuilt in the future and because of this should remain journalists' main focus (Brock, 2013:202). Brock (2013:231-232) believes there are two main reasons why the printed newspaper industry will not die any time soon. Firstly, people like the reading information in a printed format because newspapers tend to be more visually satisfying and carry greater authority (Brock, 2013:231). Secondly, the type of content offered in newspapers and the perception that the type of news published in newspapers can most likely not be found elsewhere (Brock, 2013:232). These reasons may create a sense of optimism about the future of print media publications, but journalists have adapted to the changes and challenges journalism will continue to experience, but journalists have "no choice but to find ways of supporting journalism in new conditions" (Brock, 2013:230).

According to Chisholm (2010:14) the new trends community print newspapers will have to master in order to survive are based on how their readers behave and how community newspapers interact with them. These trends include the reduction in available reading time, the differing behaviour patterns of readers between print and digital media where print publications continue to enjoy the most reader loyalty, the growing participation of readers in the production of content, the revolutionising of interacting with readers through social networks and a reluctance to pay for content (Chisholm, 2010:14). The biggest trends in terms of revenue are the shift from standard marketing practices to approaches that are directed at specific markets and advertisers only paying if they see results on their ad spend (Chisholm, 2010:14-15). He believes the only way to satisfy the growing demands of readers

in terms of the type of content community newspapers produce and interactivity, is to offer “a higher level of journalism, both in volume and quality” in order to re-attract readers (Chisholm, 2010:16). This is important not just for the survival of community print newspapers, but also journalism in general. He explains (Chisholm, 2010:16):

If the transparency to which society is entitled is not going to be spun into oblivion, then we need more journalism and journalists. But, of course, the issue has nothing to do with need, but everything to do with money. And a we’ve seen in the past two years, when the going gets tough, the cuts keep coming.

Chisholm (2010:16) argues, however, that newspaper revenues will recover to some extent, though savings will continue to come from decreasing the pagination of print editions. Chisholm (2010:17) believes the best way community newspapers can go about increasing their revenue is by applying the online principle of “double your audience, double your revenue” and for that to happen they need to reposition their energy, efforts and content in such a way that attract readers not only to their print publications, but also their online platforms. Chisholm (2010:18) as well as Pickard and Stearns (2011:47) state that journalists should focus on the most important role of community newspapers, which is to bring about justice and improvement in society while preserving community values. Chisholm explains (2010:19):

Left on the current trajectory, the business will make a recovery, due to the opportunities in advertising. But journalism will suffer. The solution must be

for journalists to realise they have a valuable role to play in improving the performance of their business. By setting objectives in terms of audience engagement, the news media will not only see quality journalism being retained, but flourishing to the levels it deserves – and our society demands.

Shafer (2016) also argues that newspaper revenues will recover, but that the days of a 25 percent profit margin are over and that a revenue of 5 percent is more likely. He also believes that if publishers of print newspapers want to have successful online platforms that grab readers' attention, they need to invent something original instead of simply repurposing its newspaper copy (Shafer, 2016).

Terry (2011:79) believes that like schools and banks, a community newspaper is “an essential ingredient of a robust and sustainable community”. For community newspapers to not only survive but also thrive, he says they need to continue to thoroughly entrench themselves in the communities they serve (Terry, 2011:80). According to him, this could prove to be the saving grace of the print media industry in general (Terry, 2011:80):

... there is a need for journalism of [a] different sort at metro level and that things are proceeding in the right direction at community level, assuming a financial model can be put in place. More than a method or a theory, community journalism is an attitude that journalists of any strip can adopt. The future and the present are hyperlocal and hyperlinked.

Terry (2011:80) believes another opportunity for community newspapers to thrive is the readers' recent tendency to abandon national dailies in favour of local publications because they do not feel that the content applies to their everyday lives and are "so disillusioned with the vertical world they no longer care to participate" (Terry, 2011:80). He explains (Terry, 2011:80):

[Readers] are creating their own worlds and their own communities. And therein is the challenge and the future for community journalism, journalists and their community publications, no matter how or where they are delivered or formed.

He says it is up to community newspapers to determine their own relevance in the online media environment in order to also retain readers who no longer live in the community and in doing so ensure their survival by maintaining their keepsake value (Kitch, 2009:340; Terry, 2011:81). As Kitch (2009:340) puts it:

... editorial choices are made not only because the news is of great importance, but also because editors and designers know that they are producing something that will be saved for years to come.

The researcher could not find any literature on how journalists at community print newspapers in South Africa feel about the future of such publications. This study explores

how journalists at Boland Media and WP Media feel about the future of community print newspapers.

## **2.6. Summary**

This chapter offered a review of existing research which explores topics and themes similar to the topic of this researcher's own study. Though the literature referred to in this chapter offers valuable insights and background information about the changes and challenges the digitisation of the media has brought about in certain parts of the print media industry, it also demonstrates that there is a lack of literature which reflects the perspectives of journalists working at community print newspapers in South Africa on the changes and challenges they experience at their publications.

This research project will address this gap in existing research and establish whether the changes and challenges experienced by the print media industry in general was also experienced by community print newspapers in South Africa. This researcher will also explore whether journalists at community print newspapers experienced any changes or challenges with regard to citizen journalism or their interaction with their readers on digital platforms. The following chapters will outline this study's theoretical framework (Chapter 3) as well as research methodology (Chapter 4).

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical framework**

In order to describe, interpret and understand the experiences and perceptions of community journalists working at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media, the researcher has chosen to use phenomenology as the theoretical framework for this research project.

In order to properly outline the theoretical framework for this study, the researcher first describes the value and goals of theory in media studies, which originated from sociology and aims to describe, explain, interpret, predict and attempt to reform “internal relations within the media or external relations with other structures and the media’s audiences” (Fourie, 2007:112). The researcher then discusses the building blocks that make up the theoretical framework for this study and provides background information on the interpretive paradigm, one of the four sociological paradigms, and phenomenology, a theoretical approach within the interpretive paradigm.

#### **3.1. The value and goals of theory**

Theory is defined by Wood (2000:33) as “a human account of what something is, how it works, what it produces or causes to happen, and how that something can be changed, if necessary”.

The scientific value of theory is “that it teaches us how to describe, interpret, understand, evaluate and predict a phenomenon” and also gives us an overview of the development of a discipline (Fourie, 2007:103). The skills of describing, interpreting and understanding a

phenomenon can also become an integral part of how we deal with our realities and resolve the problems present in these realities, which is why theory is also of practical value (Fourie, 2007:103). The researcher will use these skills to describe the changes and challenges experienced by community journalists at community newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media, interpret these changes and challenges, evaluate different options these journalists have for dealing with these changes and challenges and predict possible outcomes in terms of the future of community print newspapers and community journalism in South Africa (adapted from Fourie, 2007:104).

The definition of theory provided by Wood (2000:33) makes it clear theory cannot be objective or necessarily true because it is based on a human account. It rather provides us with different points of view about the same thing (Fourie, 2007:104). The goal of this study is to explore subjective experience and perspectives and so is in keeping with the goal of media studies.

A number of scholars do not agree that theory needs to reform something and should rather be focused on describing, explaining and understanding something (Fourie, 2007:105). Others, especially critical scholars and critical theory in the social sciences who strive to improve society, emphasise the need to reform (Fourie, 2007:105). Though the aim of this study is not to identify possible reforms, it does evaluate different options these journalists have for dealing with these changes and challenges and proposes other options which could be used to safeguard the future of community journalism in South Africa.



### 3.2. The building blocks of theory

The building blocks of theory which relates to human behaviour of any kind are ontology, epistemology, purpose and focus.

Ontology refers to how theorists view reality and human nature (Du Plooy, 2009:20). These views are divided into two broad categories: a deterministic view or determinism and a liberal view or humanism (Fourie, 2007:106). While the point of departure for a deterministic view is that human behaviour is governed by forces beyond individual control, the point of departure for a liberal view is that people are free to make choices and behave the way they wish (Fourie, 2007:106).

Epistemology, also referred to as the science of knowledge, is concerned with how we know what we know (Fourie, 2007:107). Again, there are two broad schools of thought on the epistemology of a theory. The first, also referred to as the positivistic view, emphasises the scientific method and aims to formulate a scientific description of the world and phenomena (Fourie, 2007:117). This school of thought believes in objective truth and that reality is the same for everyone (Wood, 2000:60). The second believes in subjective truth and assumes that there are multiple views of reality (Wood, 2000:61). The positivistic approach is criticised for ignoring that, as Fourie (2007:123) puts it, human action is not simply a response to stimuli, but rather based on interpretation and understanding which are derived from a person's values. It would therefore be impossible to provide objective truth on human behaviour, because it is "subjective and based on values, intentions, interpretations, understandings, meanings and contexts which may differ from person to person, group to group and circumstance to circumstance (Fourie, 2007:123-124). Fourie (2007:124) argues

the task of social research should be “to understand a phenomenon contextually and to evaluate and consider various alternative understandings on the basis of which action could be considered”.

The purpose of theory is the third building block. The two distinguishable schools of thought with reference to the purpose of theory is either universalists or situationalists (Fourie, 2007:108). While universalists believe the purpose of theory is to supply universal laws on human behaviour, situationalists believe doing so is impossible and that theory should rather offer rules that can be used to describe patterns in human behaviour (Fourie, 2007:108).

The focus of a theory is the final building block and can be divided between the behaviourism and humanism schools of thought (Fourie, 2007:109). In terms of behaviourism, the focus of a theory should be observable behaviour, such as the things people do or say (Fourie, 2007:109). Humanists, however, believe theory should focus on the meaning of behaviour and acknowledges that meaning may vary between circumstances and conditions (Fourie, 2007:109). For humanism, the reason why people behave in certain ways is more important than a specific behaviour (Fourie, 2007:109).

This study uses humanism as a point of departure to explore subjective truths and multiple views in order to describe certain patterns in human behaviour in order to understand why participants in this study behave the way they do.

### 3.3. The goal of media studies

Fourie (2007:113) argues that the media is one of the most important institutions and structures in society because it is one of the most invasive socialisation instruments and puts members of society in contact with other members, structures and institutions. The media is also responsible for teaching us the values and norms of society (Fourie, 2007:113).

While sociology studies social relationships in general, media studies focus on describing and, if necessary, changing the relations between the media and society (Fourie, 2007:113).

Croteau and Honyes (2003:22) identify three types of relations as the object of media studies:

- The external relations between media institutions and other institutions in society, such as the relationship between the media and the government;
- The internal relations within media institutions, such as the relationships between the various members of a publication's editorial team or between the editorial team and a publication's management structures;
- Media institutions' relationship with their audiences.

Fourie (2007:115) argues all media theories and research deals with these relationships and that the goal of media theories and research should be to understand structures involved in these relationships and how human agencies these structures.

This study describes and interprets certain aspects of the internal relations within the newsrooms of the community newspapers represented in this study as well as these publications' relationship with their audiences and thus is in keeping with the goal of sociological research.

### **3.4. The interpretive paradigm and sociological research**

The interpretive paradigm is one of the four sociological paradigms introduced by Burrell and Morgan (1979) which rejects the positivistic scientific method and rather focuses on understanding behaviour. In this section, the researcher explains why she believes the interpretive paradigm is most suited to the aims of this study.

According to the interpretive paradigm the social realm is a process which is shaped by the individuals who participate in it (Burrell & Morgan, 1979:28). The interpretive paradigm is informed by “a concern to understand the world as it is” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979:31).

This paradigm’s rejection of the positivistic approach which employs the scientific method is in keeping with Max Weber’s argument that the “proper task of social investigation is the interpretative understanding of the meaning of social action” (Fourie, 2007:123). For this reason, the interpretive paradigm uses a subjective approach to analysis and focus on understanding the social world as it is (Burrell & Morgan, 1979:31). The purpose and focus of research conducted within the interpretive paradigm is to understand a research subject’s perspective by exploring their background and lives (Burrell & Morgan 1979, 31).

This paradigm has been useful in this study which aims to understand the perceptions and experiences of journalists working at community newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media.

In this study, the social realm in which the participants function is community journalism in South Africa where they experience changes and challenges and interact with other

individuals and structures which influence the way they perform in this realm. In order to understand this social realm and gain insight into the state of community journalism in South Africa, the researcher explores the experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study.

### **3.5. Background information on the phenomenological approach**

The researcher employs a phenomenological approach to understand and interpret the experiences and perceptions of the community journalists who participated in this study.

Phenomenology, a term originally coined by philosopher Edmund Husserl, is a qualitative research approach used to explore and interpret individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2007:59; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009:11). A study which employs this approach does not aim to prove any hypotheses, but rather to explore and interpret journalists' experiences through the study of phenomena (Hussey & Hussey, 1997:52).

The underlying proposition of phenomenology is that reality is a structure which consists of meanings individuals attribute to it (Fourie, 2007:146). According to this perspective, "what we experience as 'the world' or 'reality' is constituted by common-sense knowledge and taken-for-granted interpretations" (Fourie, 2007:146). The goal of research conducted from this perspective, is to identify principles and shared assumptions which underlie individuals' perception or interpretation of reality.

Tandoc and Takahashi (2016:6) believes phenomenology “encourages a focus on how journalists make meanings out of what they do and what they experience while engaged in their journalistic practice” by exploring influences on their routines and outputs.

This researcher believes this perspective is suited to the topic, because it enables her to explore not only how journalists experience and perceive changes and challenges at their publications, but also what they believe the consequences of digital disruption are to the newsrooms in which they have to function and the communities they serve. This researcher is cognisant of the fact that a phenomenological approach is subjective and there is a risk that the questions asked during the interviews and subsequently the data they produce could be tainted by the researchers preconceived ideas. This has, however, been negated by formulating these questions in the most objective manner possible in order for the participants to provide answers which reflect their own experiences and perceptions.

### **3.6. Summary**

This chapter provides background information on phenomenology, the researcher’s chosen theoretical framework for this research project as well as the motivation for why it suits the goal of this study. In the next chapter, the researcher will provide the research design and methodology used in this study.

## **Chapter 4: Research methodology and design**

This chapter follows from the theoretical framework described in Chapter 3 and outlines the research methodology the researcher chose to explore the changes and challenges in community journalism in South Africa. The researcher chose to undertake a study which is qualitative in nature and focuses on exploring and interpreting the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study. In this chapter, the researcher motivates why she chose a qualitative method, specifically conducting interviews with the participants in this study, to explore the perceptions and experiences of community journalists working at community print newspapers in South Africa.

In this chapter, the researcher provides a detailed outline of the research design chosen for this study.

### **4.1. Qualitative research methodology**

While quantitative research restricts itself to data and rejects any form of speculation (Du Plooy, 2009:22), a qualitative approach focuses on “understanding particular situations, rather than generalising findings” (Du Plooy, 2009:34). It has become a popular approach for studies conducted in the field of social sciences (Leedy & Ormond, 2005:133) such as sociology, which aims to understand the relationship between people, institutions and structures (Fourie, 2007:113).

The goal of this study is to understand how journalists working at community print newspapers experience changes and challenges in their industry and is thus in keeping with the aims of sociological research projects.

According to Du Plooy (2009:39) quantitative research remains useful when conducting research on certain aspects of mass communication, but a qualitative approach is more useful when analysing employees' attitudes, feelings and perceptions. This approach will thus enable the researcher to provide an in-depth analysis of the real-world experiences of journalists working at the community newspapers of Boland Media and WP Media.

Du Plooy (2009:88) also argues that qualitative research is a suitable approach to follow when limited information is available for a specific field of study. As this researcher has indicated in previous chapters, limited research has been done on how South African community journalists experience and perceive the changes and challenges in their industry. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised as it explores the perceptions and experiences of a small group of South African community journalists, conducting qualitative research on this topic provides insight into this relatively unexplored topic as well as possible points of departure for future research.

## **4.2. Research design**

The goal of the researcher's field research is to collect and compile data which will give her insight into how South African community journalists working at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media perceive and experience changes in their industry. The researcher compiled a list of general questions which will enable her to



answer the study's key research question: What are the changes and challenges as experienced by journalists at Boland Media and WP Media' community newspapers?

In order to answer the main research question, the following specific questions will be used to gain insight into how journalists view these changes and challenges at Boland Media and WP Media (see Addendum A for the complete list of questions):

- What are the journalists' experiences of the ways the newsroom as well as the way it functions have changed since they started working at their various publications?
- What are the journalists' views on the increasing pressure to remain profitable and the way this has affected the editorial quality of community print newspapers?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their relationship and interactions with the communities they serve?
- What are the journalists' views on the future of community print newspapers?

These questions were sent to the participants before the interviews took place in order to give them time to reflect on them. During some interviews, the researcher asked participants questions that were not included in this list, how the work they do differs from the work they thought they would be doing when they started working at their various publications, in order for participants to provide further information or more clarity.

It was important to phrase the questions in such a way that it reflects the participants' subjective perceptions and experience and not those of the researcher. The researcher is, however, responsible for interpreting the data collected through the interviews.

The research questions are phrased in such a way that they do not cause the respondents to answer in a manner which has been influenced by the researcher's preconceived ideas about the study (Du Plooy, 2009:196).

The researcher limited the amount of time she talks during the interviews to a minimum, but still approached the interview as a conversation between the researcher and the participant (Babbie, 2010:320). This enabled the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:139). It also enabled the researcher to "understand how the respondent's frame of meaning is constructed" (Du Plooy, 2009:198).

#### **4.2.1. Unit of analysis**

The unit of analysis in this study, understood as the group of people being investigated in this study (Du Plooy, 2009:56), is community journalists working at weekly community print newspapers at Boland Media and WP Media which are both subdivisions of Media24 News.

The participants included in this study are community journalists working at *District Mail*, *Paarl Post*, *Swartland Gazette* and *Weslander*, weekly community print newspapers published by Boland Media, as well as *People's Post* and *Tygerburger*, weekly community print newspapers published by WP Media.

*District Mail* serves communities in Somerset West, Strand, Macassar, Gordonsbaai, Firgrove, Grabouw and Elgin in the Western Cape (Media24, 2019). *Paarl Post* serves communities in Paarl, Wellington, Franschhoek, Simondium and Klapmuts (Media24, 2019).

*Swartland Gazette* is a freesheet which serves communities and is distributed weekly in Malmesbury, Moorreesburg, the Riebeek Valley, Darling and Yzerfontein (Media24). *Weslander* serves communities in Vredenburg, Saldanha, Hopefield, Paternoster, Stompneus Bay, Velddrif, St Helena Bay, Langebaan, Langebaan Way, Aurora, Redelinghuys, Elands Bay, Porterville, Piketberg, Lambert's Bay and Moorreesburg (Media24). *People's Post* is a freesheet which serves communities and is distributed weekly in the southern suburbs, Atlantic seaboard and City Bowl areas of Cape Town (Media24). *Tygerburger* is a freesheet which serves communities and is distributed weekly in the northern and southern suburbs of Cape Town (Media24).

All of these publications consist of hyperlocal content divided into section such as news, school news, arts and entertainment and sport. All of these publications' online content is available free of charge.

#### **4.2.2. Sampling**

The researcher chose to draw a purposive sample for the in-depth interviews in order to have a sample of participants with knowledge that is applicable to the topic of this study (Du Plooy, 2009:123).

The sample consists of a population of nine community journalists, which is in keeping with the typical sample size of a study which employs purposive sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:139).

The participants in the study are (in no particular order):

Community journalist	Reason for selection
Maryke Swart	Former senior journalist at <i>District Mail</i> and currently the news editor at <i>Swartland Gazette</i> (Boland Media)
Tasmin Cupido	Editor at <i>District Mail</i> (Boland Media)
Johané Scott	Journalist at <i>Paarl Post</i> (Boland Media)
Tandy-Lee Marinus	Journalist at <i>Paarl Post</i> (Boland Media)
Veronica Boyi	News editor and journalist at <i>Swartland Gazette</i> (Boland Media)
Yaël Malgas	Journalist at <i>Weslander</i> (Boland Media)
Earl Haupt	Senior journalist at <i>People's Post</i> (WP Media)
Nielen de Klerk	Senior journalist at <i>Tygerbuger</i> (WP Media)
Nicole McCain	Senior journalist at <i>People's Post</i> (WP Media)

#### 4.2.3. In-depth interviews

The researcher conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with community journalists in order to provide insight and meaning to the study.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in person with five of the participants in this study – namely Maryke Swart, Tasmin Cupido, Earl Haupt, Nielen de Klerk and Nicole McCain – which enabled the researcher to provide structure to the interviews while also

having the flexibility to “deviate and ask follow-up or probing questions based on the respondent’s replies” (Du Plooy, 2009:198). The interviews were conducted in the journalists’ offices in order for them to feel comfortable enough to behave normally (Du Plooy, 2009:207).

The rest of the respondents – namely Johané Scott, Tandy-Lee Marinus, Veronica Boyi and Yaël Malgas – were conducted via email, because these participants indicated that they did not have time to conduct an interview in person. The researcher is cognisant of the fact that conducting an interview via email could be considered less insightful than an interview in-person, because the interviewer is unable to ask follow-up questions immediately and is unable to observe the participants’ nonverbal responses (Du Plooy, 2009: 198). The researcher could, however, send follow-up questions to these participants after analysing their responses. The researcher also believes that the content of these participants’ responses and the meaning they add to the study is more important than the format in which they were communicated to the researcher. Furthermore, the sample size of this study made it necessary to include any and all participants with the correct characteristics willing to participate.

All the participants in the study were presented with the same interview guide (Addendum A), containing a general description of the study and a list of specific questions. This interview guide was sent beforehand to the participants who participated in the semi-structured interviews in person.

The questions in the interview guide are derived from the themes explored in Chapter 2 in order to establish the participants’ opinions and experiences of these themes. Though the researcher asked specific questions about the themes explored in this study’s literature

review, the questions are open-ended in nature which allowed participants to provide their own views and opinions according to what they deemed to be the most important aspects of the various themes. During the in-person interviews, additional questions were asked by the researcher in order to clarify the respondents' answers, but the researcher's participation in the interviews were otherwise limited to asking the specific questions contained in the interview guide.

There was no time limit set for the in-person interviews in order to give participants the opportunity to provide long responses where necessary without feeling pressured to rather provide a shorter response. The in-person interviews were recorded and transcribed. These transcripts were referred to during the researcher's data analysis. The transcripts are accessible to the researcher's supervisor and external examiners. The recordings and transcripts are kept in a password protected archive.

#### **4.3. Ethical considerations**

The researcher is cognisant of the fact that she has a responsibility towards the participants in the study and is required to conduct the study in an ethical manner. In order to do so, the researcher applied for ethical clearance as specified by Stellenbosch University's ethical clearance policy. In order to comply with this policy, the researcher explained the context and goal of her research to the participants and also indicated that participation in the study was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any point. The researcher also explained to participants that they have the option of participating in the study anonymously. None of the participants opted to exercise this option. All the participants in the study also

signed informed consent forms which gives the researcher formal permission to include their responses in her study.

#### **4.4. Summary**

This chapter outlined the research methodology and design for this study, which is qualitative in nature and uses in-depth interviews with community journalists working at weekly community print newspapers in South Africa, who were selected to participate in the study because they possess specialised knowledge suited to the topic of this study. In the next chapter, the researcher presents the findings of the interviews.

## **Chapter 5: Data-analysis and findings**

In this chapter, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the data gathered through interviews with the participants in this study. This chapter is based on the literature review presented in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 and the research design and methodology for this study presented in Chapter 4.

The goal of this chapter is to answer this study's key research question: What are the changes and challenges journalists at Boland Media and WP Media' community newspapers experience in their newsrooms?

This chapter will also answer the general questions set out in Chapter 1:

- What are the journalists' experiences of the ways the newsroom as well as the way it functions have changed since they started working at their various publications?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their role in the communities they serve and what challenges have they experienced in attempting to fulfil this role?
- What are the journalists' views on the increasing pressure to remain profitable and the way this has affected the editorial quality of community print newspapers?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their relationship and interactions with the communities they serve?
- What are the journalists' views on the future of community print newspapers?

In keeping with the manner in which the interview guide was compiled, the answers will be presented according to the different themes discussed in Chapter 2.



The first section of this chapter will discuss what general changes and challenges journalists at Boland Media and WP Media have experienced in their newsrooms.

The second section of this chapter will present the findings on the journalists' perception of how their role in the communities they serve has changed and their ability to perform this role.

The third section of this chapter explores the changes and challenges the respondents experience with having to function in an online environment, including how being present on social media platforms altered the way they interact with their readers.

The fourth section of this chapter explores the changes and challenges journalists working at Boland Media and WP Media have experienced in maintaining the quality of the editorial content in their publications.

The final section of this chapter presents finding on how the participants perceive the future of community print newspapers in its current format.

### **5.1. General changes and challenges in the newsrooms**

All the respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018) have experienced changes in their newsrooms, ranging from subtle changes to drastic changes. Cupido (2018), who has been a community print journalist since 2007, indicates that she has experienced newsrooms as environments that are everchanging. The biggest change she has experienced is how

important looking after the business side of her publication has become to not only management and the sales representatives, but also to the editorial staff (Cupido, 2018).

Cupido (2018) explains:

The business side is being driven from all sides just so everyone can make money and continue doing what we're doing... The business versus editorial side of it is so, so big these days. I can't tell you how many meetings we [attend] just to find out what the advertising team is doing and how we can help them make their targets.

Swart (2018) shares this sentiment and adds that except for sharing the concern about their publications' financial wellbeing, it has also become necessary for journalists in newsrooms at community print newspapers to be more versatile in terms of what they are able to report on, because the number of staff members in the newsroom is generally insufficient. Swart (2018) and Cupido (2018) both referred to the fact that having to juggle deadlines for the multiple titles they have to produce, puts further pressure on a newsroom which is "running on empty". Cupido (2018) explains:

We have numerous deadlines for the various publications we deliver so there is no downtime between deadlines. The moment you put one publication to bed, you have to start with the next one... That's not even adding the fact that you have to start thinking digitally. You have to start pushing your content online. We're not even getting to that yet because our

time is consumed by doing what we have to do to get the paper to the printers.

Most of the respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Swart, 2018) experience staff shortages, or having just enough editorial staff in the newsroom to produce sufficient content to fill the newspapers, as one of the biggest in the newsroom. As McCain (2018) explains:

Every time someone leaves or goes on maternity leave, it's a crisis, because someone else has to do their work. Someone would ask you to do their work 'for now', but then 'for' now would turn into months or years.

She says having to work like this impedes her ability to deliver her best work (McCain, 2018). Haupt (2018) says though his managers try to make it seem like the amount of work he needs to do stays the same, he has experienced it as becoming more. He adds he always feels like he is letting someone down when he is not at work and it should not be that way (Haupt, 2018).

Cupido (2018), Malgas (2018) and Marinus (2018) point out that adding a team member can be a protracted process and even if someone is appointed, it can be a challenge to make a new team member understand what their role and function in the newsroom is. An added challenge to finding a suitable team member to fill vacant posts, is finding someone who is

from or able to move to the community that the community print newspaper serves (Malgas, 2018). Malgas (2018) explains:

Team dynamics and even work distribution is something that takes time [to achieve]. When the new journalist is ‘green’, this means that person has to be trained and shown the ropes of this specific newsroom which can put a strain on the other team members. Training someone takes time and resources so this can also add to the pressure on the other team members but is very necessary to get the newsroom to function as a unit.

Cupido (2018) and Swart (2018) add that people seem reluctant to apply for positions at community print newspapers because they are perceived as inferior publications. Swart (2018) explains why she perceives other publications share this view:

Even from a daily newspaper’s perspective, I used to work at one, they frown upon community newspapers. But the roles seem to have changed because now they look at community newspapers to get their stories... Now journalists at dailies and other publications have more respect for journalists at community newspapers.

Cupido (2018) thinks the change in perspective has come about because journalists working at daily newspapers have realised how important it is for journalists to know who their readers are. Cupido (2018) explains:

They don't know who they're writing for. They envy that to a certain point. They pick up a story, chew on it and spit it out while we can go back to the people involved and find out how we can help them. There's still a perception that they look down at us and they do. But they still get their community news from us because they read community newspapers.

Cupido (2018) and Swart (2018) have also noticed that for millennials, people born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, joining newsrooms has been challenging in itself. Cupido (2018) explains:

They're the first to moan when change comes. This is a tough industry and the world out there is tough. They could have fantastic opportunities here, but they don't see it that way. They don't see it as a place where you can learn. People come here and when I ask them in their interviews where they see themselves in five years, they say they see themselves working at Cosmopolitan. People don't realise that community newspapers are actually where it's happening most of the time. This is where you learn the most.

Boyi (2018), who has to manage both the editing and content production at her publication, says being the only member on her editorial team becomes very challenging when she needs support or advice:

I have to keep my fingers on every possible story that is newsworthy and in the interest of the community... I envy the way other newsrooms are structured as there is always someone who you can ask for advice or assistance. I had to learn very quickly how to get by on my own.

The number of staff members available has changed the way community print newspapers at Boland Media and WP Newspaper assign beats to specific journalists, a system generally used in most newsrooms to assign specific topics or sections to specific journalists at a publication. At Boland Media and WP Media some publications assign a number of topics to a specific journalist while others choose to assign a specific residential area to a specific journalist. Both these approaches result in journalists having to cover various types of stories.

Scott (2018) says she was not surprised to find that she would have to cover multiple beats at her publication, because she had been warned during her studies to become a journalist that it is something a modern journalist must be able to do. De Klerk (2018) believes having to write about multiple topics not only makes journalists more versatile, but also helps them to serve all their readers and their community as a whole. She says covering so many topics in a specific community also has its challenges (De Klerk, 2018):

The problem is that because you decide what stories you want to report on, you end up gravitating to certain topics and certain types of stories. It can also become very overwhelming, because you have to try write everything from report on city council meetings to profile articles.

Cupido (2018) and Malgas (2018) believe covering different beats and reassigning beats from time to time can help a journalist grow their skillset and also prohibit them becoming bored or frustrated with a topic. Cupido (2018) explains:

We veer off our beats all the time, because you're going to get frustrated and stagnate if you stick to your beats... Young journalists who come into the newsroom realise they can learn so much more by taking on whatever stories [need to be covered]. They are going to grow.

The sport beat is, however, the one beat that according to Haupt (2018) should be covered by a reporter who has specialised knowledge on that topic. Giving the sport section the attention he believes it deserves interfered with his other core function, which he believes is newsgathering (Haupt, 2018). Haupt (2018) explains:

I wasn't as efficient as I could be and that necessitated me changing what and how I was doing things... I would have loved to focus on sport. Our sport coverage still suffers. Someone just needs to add a little more attention and energy to it. There are only three journalists [at WP Media] who can do sport stories. If you could have one journalist who just does sport, it would make a world of change to the quality of our sport pages. We also don't generally get a lot of space for sport.

Marinus (2018), who also covers the sport beat at her publication, adds that she does not have access to the necessary equipment, specifically camera equipment, to take the high-quality action photos that would help her capture “the essence, intensity and mood of the game” for her readers. Marinus (2018) explains:

I believe that the quality of photos should be of a standard that I can be proud to have it on my back page especially. It's rather embarrassing standing next to a field while there are other photographers with huge lenses...

The other respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Swart, 2018) indicated that though the equipment they have is not on the standard they would prefer it to be, they have the equipment needed to do their jobs.

In terms of financial resources, Cupido (2018) feels the editorial staff sometimes have to go through large amounts of red tape before they are allowed to buy new equipment or spend money on things like boosting their posts on Facebook in order to grow their following on this social media platform. Haupt (2018) and Cupido (2018) says journalists at community print newspapers are not being paid enough considering the amount of work they are expected to do and they skills the need to do said work. He explains (Haupt, 2018):

Career-wise, yes, I've gotten exposure and experience, but whether I can sustain myself and provide the things I need to live a happy life?



## 5.2. The role of community print newspapers

A number of the respondents (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018) feel the role community print newspapers play in the communities they serve has not changed and their core function remains to supply hyperlocal news to their readers. Marinus (2018) says community journalists perform various other roles in their communities as well, such as being a mouthpiece for other members of the community, making people aware of the impact their actions have on others and addressing social injustice. She explains why community print newspapers provide such an important service to their communities (Marinus, 2018):

We are sometimes teachers, doctors, police officers, lawyers, advisers, councillors, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, scientists, food experts and sometimes just normal human beings... We are the bridge between schools and the media. To ensure that achievements get placed and that learners or anyone else is given the credit they deserve.

McCain (2018) notes her publication has started focusing more on brand building where the publication tries to have more of a physical presence at and involvement with events taking place in the community. This also gives them an opportunity to interact with their readers and find out whether readers enjoy their content (McCain, 2018). Though she believes the publications efforts to build a stronger brand, McCain (2018) says there have also been occasions where getting involved with events have been turned down because management believed it would be too expensive.

The biggest change to the role community journalists play has rather been within their publication. Cupido (2018), Marinus (2018) and Swart (2018) have indicated that journalists have already become involved in their advertorial teams' activities through the writing of advertorials and the managing of supplements and other special projects aimed at generating revenue. Marinus (2018) says adding this to the already long list of roles journalists are expected to fulfil, is taxing in many ways:

Things such as supplements, like the interschools books [we produce] for which we get no recognition is hard work, emotionally and physically. Not to mention the strain it puts on the time you have to spend with your family. It affects the mental strength of a journalist and this results in depression, an illness which is crippling the world already. We take our jobs seriously, we want to please everyone.

Cupido (2018) believes that despite the large number of roles that journalists are already expected to play, it will probably change in the future to also include selling advertising space to advertisers. Cupido (2018) explains:

Journalists are good salespeople because they can talk people into giving them what they want. We just don't see it that way because we are journalists through and through. There will come a time when this change will come. How you approach it will determine what the outcome will be. At District Mail, we've had people who didn't want to change with the times. They are no longer here.

Other respondents (Boyi, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; McCain, 2018; Swart, 2018) also believe having a positive attitude towards change as well as a willingness to adapt to changes in the newsroom is necessary for journalists. McCain (2018) explains:

I find there are two mindsets in this office. Either change is happening and you're onboard, or you're fighting it tooth and nail. I figured out long ago that this is life and if I really love this brand and want to stay here, then I will just have to put up with it and except that things are going to change all the time.

Cupido (2018), Haupt (2018) and Malgas (2018) believe streamlining their various roles and working smarter, not harder, is the best way to ensure that they perform all the roles and duties that are expected of them.

### **5.3. Functioning in an online environment**

In terms of changes and challenges caused by the digitisation of the media, De Klerk (2018) specifically points to expectations and policies surrounding the community print newspapers' digital platforms and how they should be managed (De Klerk, 2018) as something which is constantly changing. De Klerk (2018) explains:

[Digital media] is a bit of an unpleasant situation for us, because our website actually forms part of Netwerk24. I feel like we have a new policy about the website every month. We used to have our own website, we don't anymore.

We find ourselves in turbulent times... There is actually so much more we could potentially do with our website, but at the moment we can't, because we form part of Netwerk24.

A small number of people at WP Media have been assigned duties relating to looking after the publications' digital platforms, such as managing the social media platforms (De Klerk, 2018). None of the publications have undergone the same restructuring as was done at *Die Burger* in order to accommodate a digital team. She feels, however, that because managing and producing content for the digital platforms does not form a fundamental part of the entire editorial team's duties, it makes her feel very removed from them (De Klerk, 2018).

Scott (2018) says she did not experience the digitisation of the media as such a big change because the media was already digitally orientated when she became a journalist. Haupt (2018) and Cupido (2018), however, believe the digitisation of the media has been one of the biggest catalysts for change in newsrooms at community print newspapers. He explains (2018):

It's changed the way we look at how we produce news, the way we consume news and how news happen. It's changed the way companies select staff, how much they are paid and what their roles are. It's had a knock-on effect everywhere. We have to be creative with how you get your money in a digital environment and our staff have to be more creative with how we source stories, because now anyone can become a journalist.

McCain (2018) says she first experienced Media24's big push towards digital media a few years ago. She says this push resulted in a huge overhaul at her publication and a digital first policy was adopted, but a short while later the community print newspapers lost their exclusive websites to become tabs on Netwerk24 and News24 (McCain, 2018). Cupido (2018) says though her editorial team is constantly being reminded about utilising the publication's digital platforms, they tend to take a backseat to the printed publication. She explains (2018):

It's always there and it's someone's beat in the newsroom, but I think it's different for us as paid-for community newspapers because you still want to protect your circulation. We're not gaining anything from [the digital platforms] and I think that's why the drive isn't there for us to focus on it.

Cupido (2018) feels digital media has created additional challenges for weekly community print newspapers, because the editorial teams working at these publications have to find different ways of reporting on stories a week after they break on social media. When her publication decides to break a story online, they choose to do it on their Facebook page where they feel they can reach their readers more effectively (Cupido, 2018; Swart 2018).

Thanks to the digitisation of the media, social media and other digital platforms have become a source of stories ideas for a number of the respondents (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018). De Klerk (2018) says she finds many of her stories on Twitter and Facebook. Malgas (2018) says social media has made it easier to get in touch with people to get information from them, because most people are present on at least

one social media platform. Cupido (2018) says social media is their main tool for finding stories. She says their readers are key to finding stories online as they tend to post the stories they think should be on District Mail's on Facebook (Cupido, 2018).

Haupt (2018), however, says he does not feel comfortable using social media and other digital platforms to source stories due to the poor quality of the information found on such platforms. He admits he may be shooting himself in the foot by resorting to more traditional methods such as using a phonebook to track down a source for a story, but he would rather speak to someone directly than resort to sending text messages and emails back and forth. Some of the respondents (Cupido, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018) also believe that using contacts to source stories remains the best way to do so.

Though social media platforms may be a useful tool when it comes to sourcing stories, the respondents feel it is very challenging to verify the information found on these platforms and because of this opts to use more traditional methods, of doing so (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018). McCain (2018) and Cupido (2018) both believe the fact that a journalist can never be entirely sure of who you are talking to when you are communicating online is risky. Cupido (2018) also points out that the prevalence of fake news on digital platforms is another reason why journalists should be cautious. At their publication, if an official source like the police can't confirm that something happened, it won't be published because writing a story based on hearsay is unethical (Cupido, 2018). Swart (2018) says community print newspapers have an advantage when it comes to verifying information because they are not under a lot of pressure to publish breaking news and have enough time to verify information with multiple sources.

Malgas (2018) believes digitisation has made traditional fact checking methods, such as talking to a source in person or demanding to see hard evidence even more important. She says the fact that most people have become more technologically savvy means it is also more important to insist on sources revealing who they are and why they have chosen to present a story or piece of information to a journalist (Malgas, 2018). She explains (Malgas, 2018):

People understand their right to be anonymous and the concept of [talking] off the record much more now... Educating sources is a major part of building trust. There have been instances where stories didn't work out because of sources not wanting to accept the terms of how a professional newsroom deals with stories.

She says in her publication's newsroom they have had to deal with sources who want the journalists to "name and shame" people, publish stories with obvious agendas or write articles based on what they tell them without supplying any evidence (Malgas, 2018).

De Klerk (2018) feels another big challenge for community print newspapers trying to function in a digital environment is maintaining a brand identity online. She says doing so is very difficult when you have to share an online platform with a brand which is considered so much bigger, especially if you are trying to attract younger readers (De Klerk, 2018). Malgas (2018) agrees that having a strong brand identity in digital spaces is vital if you want to improve your digital reach.

Cupido (2018) says not really having an online brand identity and being a predominantly English publication on Netwerk24, an Afrikaans news website, is perhaps the biggest reason why the editorial team at her publication are reluctant to get involved with this platform. The only way they are involved with their content on Netwerk24, is checking that their content displays correctly (Cupido, 2018). She elaborates (Cupido, 2018):

I will continue to protect the brand, because ultimately the people that live here don't know the people at Netwerk24. Netwerk24 does not have to face our readers, we do. So ultimately protecting our brand is what is important to us.

Haupt (2018) describes the situation as similar to eating KFC at Nando's. He believes it is impossible to "grow a brand that's handcuffed to another brand", though it makes financial sense to have everything centralised and hosted on the same platform.

The respondents indicate that though they are aware of the prominent role digital media plays in the media industry and that it will continue to become more important, they continue to focus on their print publications because they feel their publications depend on the print editions to drive the circulation which ultimately enables them to generate revenue through the sale of advertising space (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018). Cupido (2018) explains:



Print remains key for us. We can't change that because we still need to drive out print circulation... Digitisation is the way forward and we all have to start thinking that way, but we just don't have the time. You will have to take away another product and get new people that focus on the digital stuff.

For this reason, while some of the respondents try to be the first to break local news on their digital platforms (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018), the respondents' digital platforms are normally only updated with new stories from their print edition once a week. Haupt (2018) says he once perceived Media24 as a forward-thinking company when it came to the changes and challenges in the media industry, but that is no longer the case. He explains (Haupt, 2018):

It seems to me that now we are just feeding on this frenzy that everyone else is also feeding on. We're like fish who don't see the shark coming. We're not trying to see how we can avoid being eaten by the shark or how we can switch places and be the shark.

Some of the respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; Swart, 2018) say the use of social media platforms have not changed the amount of feedback they receive from their readers. According to McCain (2018), it seems her publication is getting less feedback from readers, possibly because they feel more comfortable being spectators rather than actively engaging with the publication and its content. She says not getting feedback from readers is a challenge (McCain, 2018):

[It] feels like I'm speaking to myself. I don't know if people are getting the paper, because our distribution system is terrible... I don't know if anybody out there is listening. Getting feedback would have helped me know whether I'm doing things right or not. Right now I'm doing what I think is right based on the fact that no one has told me I'm doing it wrong.

Cupido (2018) says readers are also reluctant to respond to questions or story ideas posted on her publication's Facebook page. Malgas (2018) experiences a sense of caution from readers when it comes to voicing their opinions on social media platforms because their comments can be viewed and commented on by other readers. There are also other challenges with the way readers behave on social media platforms when they do decide to interact (Malgas, 2018):

Readers are less forgiving and much more vocal. Digital platforms have created a way for readers to publicly, sometimes irresponsible, voice their opinion. Readers feel that giving feedback on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter is much more anonymous, which is not always the case. For some reason readers believe making statements online is not the same as publishing it in the newspaper. This has meant that the newsroom has to be more savvy, careful and transparent when it comes to their shortcomings... Engaging with readers on such platforms can also be very rewarding and grow the business in positive ways.

Boyi (2018) and Marinus (2018) experience very different types of feedback from their readers. While Boyi (2018) says the feedback she receives are usually messages to thank her for writing specific stories or suggestions on how articles could have been written which she believes guides her to write articles the readers will enjoy more. Marinus (2018), however, has had negative experiences with feedback from readers:

The feedback [from the readers] is mostly negative and we have to turn a blind eye and pick ourselves up from these disappointments even though we know we have put every ounce of ourselves into a story.

The respondents (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018) indicate that though the digitisation has amplified the changes and challenges at community print newspapers, the challenges and the fact that things are changing is nothing new. They also believe changes and challenges will always be present in newsrooms (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018).

#### **5.4. The quality of community print newspapers at Boland Media and WP Media**

According to the respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018), the editorial content in community newspapers should consist of hyperlocal stories which reflect their readers' interests, issues and achievements while also informing and educating the readers.

Malgas (2018) says the type of stories she writes change as the readers, their environment and their lives change. She says certain other factors also influence the type of stories her publication produces (Malgas, 2018):

Content is also greatly affected by journalists who choose to set a specific tone [with their articles] or cover certain topics. In our newsroom where three of the four journalists are female, there is perhaps a push for more female orientated stories. Diversity in religion and race of the team can also cause a change in content, where readers who may not have been featured in the past get coverage.

Malgas (2018) also says trying to attract younger readers has caused the content in her publication to change. She warns, however, that any changes to a publication's editorial content should be made carefully and strategically "as readers easily feel alienated if the content they buy the paper for is no longer there".

While hard news such as crime stories and municipal news are always present in their publications, respondents (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018) prefer softer news with a strong human angle, such as profiles on people from their communities who have done something newsworthy or interesting. Cupido (2018) explains:

There are the softer things that you can give more attention to and sometimes especially people who read a community newspaper want

to read that. They want to read about what's going on with the lady down the road's child and his achievements. That's what they want. They want to see people doing good.

Haupt (2018) says he tends to spend more time polishing his articles when they are soft news stories which makes them more memorable to him and a "treat" for his readers. Although he enjoys writing these types of stories and he feels they give him the opportunity to write in a more colourful style, he does not have the time to write every story this way (Haupt, 2018).

Marinus (2018) believes the scope for what type of stories can be featured has increased. There are, however, times when she gets frustrated by the emphasis that keeps being put on hard news, especially crime stories, at her publication (Marinus, 2018).

Cupido (2018) says there are times when she has to motivate why her publication has so many social pages, which are pages with photos of readers at social events. She believes that if your readers know their photo will appear in a newspaper, they will buy it, and if they find value in that paper, they will buy it again (Cupido, 2018).

All the respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018) indicate that their publications differentiate between editorial and advertorial space. The respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Swart, 2018) say the amount of editorial space fluctuates according to the number of advertisements sold, but every edition consists of 50% editorial space and 50% advertorial space. The

number of advertorials in their publications has also stayed the same (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018; Swart, 2018).

Cupido (2018) says her publication reached a turning point with the amount of space dedicated to editorial content when their publishers accepted the fact that editorial content sells newspapers, not advertisements. This, however, does not prevent advertisement sale representatives to sell advertisements with the promise of bonus editorial space (Cupido, 2018). Cupido (2018) says while the amount of space for editorial content is ample, she struggles to find space for all the stories they produce every week. She explains (Cupido, 2018):

[If] we had more space, people would be working their fingers to the bone.

There are weeks when things [have to wait until the next edition to be published] ... We're building a library of things that if for instance a full-page ad falls out, we have something to fill that space.

De Klerk (2018) and Swart (2018) say they write eight original articles every week, which may not seem like a lot but can be time-consuming considering the many roles and functions they are expected to perform. De Klerk (2018) admits that though she does all the required fact-checking and covers all the various sides to her stories, she tends to rush the writing process and select stories which would be easier to do. Cupido (2018) also says journalists at community print newspapers do not have the time or resources required to cover stories that require intense investigation. She explains (Cupido, 2018):

The belief is that there should be time for investigative journalism because we are a weekly, but we have two weeklies to put together every week, so there's just no time for it. There are times that we have really kickass stories that can turn into an investigative piece, but we don't have the time or resources really.

Cupido (2018), Haupt (2018) and Swart (2018) says going to scenes or having face-to-face interviews are things that seem standard to most journalists, but community journalists do not have time for. They say opting to not waste time travelling and rather getting the necessary information telephonically or by receiving information and photos from contacts, saves valuable time and enables them to be more productive (Cupido, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Swart).

Haupt (2018) explains:

I get four or five stories done in a day if I just use the phone and speak to people. Travelling an hour out of your workday. It takes energy out of you and affects your ability to perform when you get back to the office. There's this thing that happens to us when we go out. You hit a brick wall. And then you've got three stories to file, but you just can't muster the focus, the creativity, everything you need to write your stories.

Cupido (2018) says being on the scene sometimes speeds the process of information gathering along because journalists then have a first-hand account of what happened and do not need to work through spokespeople or communication offices to get their information.

According to the respondents (Cupido, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018; Swart, 2018) the type of journalists in the editorial team also affects the quality of a publication's content. Marinus (2018) says publications should focus on recruiting journalists that are able to function in a demanding environment such as the newsroom at a community print newspaper, rather than appointing journalists who have impressive qualifications. Cupido (2018) and Swart (2018) have experienced new journalists starting their careers at community print newspapers as unwilling to do the necessary "slob work" that goes hand in hand with producing articles for such publications. For Haupt (2018) the juniorisation of newsrooms is concerning, because senior journalists at community print newspapers are becoming scarce and no longer have time to transform them into better journalists.

Avoiding labour-intensive stories, practicing desktop journalism and the juniorisation of the newsroom are potential risks to a publication's credibility. The respondents (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; McCain, 2018; Swart, 2018) say their publications' credibility always comes first and have not experienced a change in how their readers perceive their publications' credibility. Swart (2018) says her publication has opted not to publish certain stories in the past because they posed threats to the publication's credibility.

De Klerk (2018) says readers' loyalty to her publication serves as proof that they consider them a credible news source. Haupt (2018) says he has noted, however, that steps are being taken to remind journalists about the importance of credibility. He explains (Haupt, 2018):

We're getting emails from our editors about Journalism 101 which shouldn't be happening... That's why I don't use social media [to source stories]. Information is being taken from social media and used as the base



for stories. It creates a certain perspective on the story which might be incorrect. It also shapes the community's perception of the publication and may cause them to think 'that's their style, that's their perspective, we can't trust them'.

Haupt (2018) feels though accuracy is one of the fundamentals of good journalism, there needs to be a margin for error. He explains (Haupt, 2018):

We care too much about small things like typos and spelling errors. We need to care more about the big things. There must be a balance between productivity and a margin of error where learning takes place. There are subeditors and editors for a reason. There's no margin for error at the moment, that's why we're not learning. So the young journalists become robot journalists.

Cupido (2018) believes when journalists make mistakes, they shouldn't be unwilling to admit it:

There's one thing I have always believed in. I am not afraid to fall on my sword. I make it very clear to readers who contact me as well. I am willing to apologise if I've made an error. If you make an error in judgement, you say sorry. You need to make sure that person realises you are a human being and you can make mistakes. If I misspelt someone's name, I don't mind

putting a full apology in the next issue. It takes nothing from you and a tiny bit of space in the newspaper. It's better than someone going around saying I have an attitude and not buying the newspaper anymore.

Both Cupido (2018) and McCain (2018) believe that if journalists at community print newspapers were only required to fulfil one role and perform one function, which according to them is writing stories, these stories would be of an even better quality. Cupido (2018) explains:

In the past you wouldn't have to worry about your camera bag when you were at a scene because you had a photographer with you. You didn't have to worry about what shots you have to get. You could just stand there with your notebook and write. That's it. Now you don't get to speak to the people [at the scene] because there are so many other things to think about.

### **5.5. The future of community print newspapers**

The respondents (Boyi, 2018; Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018) are positive about the future of community print newspapers, though they believe they may undergo some more changes in the future. Cupido (2018) believes paid-for titles will disappear in the future as economic realities increasingly force people to choose between buying a loaf of bread or buying a

newspaper. Swart (2018) agrees and predicts that as more titles become free titles, their staff will continue to shrink.

De Klerk (2018) says Media24's community print newspapers seem to be doing well in comparison to the company's older titles like *Die Burger* but might not enjoy the same protection as the older titles when things really start going pear-shaped at the community print newspapers. She explains (De Klerk, 2018):

We are not a legacy title so the moment we really start struggling, they will probably choose to rather close us down. There are a lot of people who are working really hard to prevent that. It would be sad [if they decided to close the publication]. We are getting smaller. Drastic changes have to be made.

A number of the respondents share her sentiment that Media24 will choose to close the community print newspapers rather than *Die Burger* even though community print newspapers continue to maintain their reputation as the most profitable titles at the company (Cupido, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Marinus, 2018; McCain, 2018).

Cupido (2018) says dailies like *Die Burger* and *Cape Argus* along with a number of other daily newspapers are already well on their way to being closed. She finds comfort in the fact that they are resorting to writing the same types of stories community newspapers write to keep their doors open:

Everyone is trying to do what we've been doing for years, but it's too late. It's way too late. Tabloids will also continue to survive, because they're writing for a specific market. That's what makes us special. We're writing for a market.

Malgas (2018) also feels community print newspapers' unique content and relationship with their readers is the thing that will enable them to exist long after other print publications have been closed. She explains (Malgas, 2018):

There is a general decrease in circulation, but community newspapers are more than simply news givers, they tend to be more closely involved in the community and this is what will keep them going. Staying hyperlocal will be key to community newspapers' survival.

Boyi (2018) and McCain (2018) say community print newspapers are the publications telling the stories that won't make the national headlines, but are just as important, perhaps even more important, than the stories found on the front page of a national daily newspaper. Boyi (2018) explains:

Community newspapers are where some of the best journalists, reporters and photographers come from because they have learned to understand that the best stories people want to read are about people and the [news] in the communities they live in. Community newspapers are for many people their

only link to knowing and being informed about what's going on in the community they live in, how this affects them and how to go about making an informed decision about the way they think, live their lives, contribute to society and view the world.

Marinus (2018) believes while online media forms an important part of the media landscape, community print newspapers will continue to survive thanks to people like her father who for the past 15 years still want to buy a newspaper every week and feel the pages in their hands. She argues that people don't want "the frills of subscription fees and annoying email updates, they just want to read the paper" (Marinus, 2018).

A number of the respondents (Cupido, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Scott, 2018) believe community print newspapers offer the best training possible for journalists looking to learn a lot of skills and become versatile reporters. There are also other benefits to working at community print newspapers, such as having an opportunity to make a difference (Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; McCain, 2018), working in an environment where deadlines are less staggered than at dailies (Scott, 2018) and working hours are more flexible (De Klerk, 2018). Marinus (2018) says it's considered an achievement if you work at a community newspaper in the community you grew up in. She explains (2018):

It's as though you owe it to the community that raised you, but you also get to keep your ear on the ground. Sometimes you find that residents from that community prefer to speak to you instead of someone from, let's say, *Die Burger*.

Cupido (2018) says though working at a community newspaper offers wonderful opportunities and is good place for journalists to start their careers, most choose not to do so because they don't realise the value of working at a community print newspaper. McCain (2018) says she continues to feel that community newspapers are treated like "the stepchildren of the media industry". Haupt (2018), who chose to return to community journalism after working at other publications, says he firmly believes starting at a community print newspaper is vital if you want to be a good journalist. He explains (Haupt, 2018):

I don't believe a journalist will be a good journalist if they haven't spent at least a year or two at a community newspaper. If you survive that long, you will be able to survive elsewhere. It takes a lot of guts to come back to a community newspaper and do it again.

People perceiving community newspapers as being inferior to daily newspapers as well as poor salaries and limited growth opportunities are the main reasons the respondents think journalists would consider leaving a community print newspaper (Cupido, 2018; De Klerk, 2018; Haupt, 2018; Malgas, 2018; Marinus, 2018; Scott, 2018; Swart, 2018). Marinus (2018) says at some point being passionate about your job and community is not enough:

I think passion always exceeds a journalist's salary, but it's the way we get treated that causes us to leave. At some point you get fed up and cannot see a future [in community journalism] for yourself anymore. Companies only

want money and readers want value for [their money], there are no two ways about that.

Haupt (2018) says working at a community newspaper can be an overwhelming experience:

People are leaving. There are reasons for it. It gets too much sometimes and then you feel like you have to change your environment. You just want to take a break because if you're a good community journalist, your community will never leave you alone.

De Klerk (2018) shares this sentiment and says readers will contact her about something as simple as a pothole in their street not being fixed because they know she will be able to help them get results. She explains (De Klerk, 2018):

I enjoy the feeling of being able to help people. That I can step in as a type of superhero and demand results. That's important. People need a platform where their issues can be aired... People would rather phone us than *Die Burger*. They trust us with their stories, and we get wonderful stories that way. [The readers] will miss us when we're gone, because who will they call about their potholes and other issues then?

Being a champion for readers' issues and causes as well as the sense of community they get from reading a community newspaper is what Malgas (2018) feels will be most missed if community print newspapers would cease to exist.

Scott (2018) and Marinus (2018) believe it would be impossible for people to navigate the world around them if community newspapers ceased to exist because these publications provide society's social, moral and knowledge maps. Scott (2018) explains what she believes the result for communities would be if community newspapers were to close their doors:

They would be guided by the untrained civil journalists on social media, contributing to bigotry, bias, racism, prejudice and unaccountability. The effect would in turn create a web of useless, space consuming information available to an already information overloaded society.

Haupt (2018) says it would be difficult to predict in what format community newspapers will be published in the future, but he believes community newspapers will never cease to exist. He explains (Haupt, 2018):

[We] shall see how the next generation handles [the format in which community newspapers are published] ... You will always need information. We are in the information age and journalists are the information carriers. We know how to work with that currency.



## 5.6. Summary

In this chapter, the researcher provided the findings and results of interviews conducted with nine journalists working at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media in order to explore the changes and challenges they experience in their newsrooms. The findings and results were organised according to the themes explored in Chapter 2.

In the next chapter, the researcher will discuss the findings and formulate the conclusion to this study. This discussion will also be organised according to the themes explored in Chapter 2. The researcher will also discuss the contribution this study makes to the existing body of academic research on community newspapers as well as the various limitations of this study and provide possible topics for further research.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion of findings and conclusion**

In Chapter 5, the findings of interviews with nine journalists working at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media were presented and discussed. The focus was on what changes and challenges in these publications' newsrooms in order to answer the key question of this study, which is: What are the changes and challenges journalists at Boland Media and WP Media' community newspapers experience in their newsrooms?

The general questions set out in Chapter 1 were also addressed:

- What are the journalists' experiences of the ways the newsroom as well as the way it functions have changed since they started working at their various publications?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their role in the communities they serve and what challenges have they experienced in attempting to fulfil this role?
- What are the journalists' views on the increasing pressure to remain profitable and the way this has affected the editorial quality of community print newspapers?
- What are the journalists' experiences of changes to their relationship and interactions with the communities they serve?
- What are the journalists' views on the future of community print newspapers?

### **6.1. Changes and challenges at community print newspapers**

From the previous chapter, it is clear that journalists working at community print newspapers at Boland Media and WP Media face many of the same changes and challenges as journalists working at other print publications. Their newsrooms are also understaffed, generating

revenue has become a concern for not only their advertising teams but also their editorial teams and maintaining their circulation is a challenge. Appointing new members to the editorial team is also challenging because newsrooms at community print newspapers require journalists who are eager to learn, versatile, willing to work hard and appreciate the role community print newspapers play in their communities. These candidates have proven to be hard to find and most candidates opt to apply for positions at more prominent titles. Most of the respondents also indicated that the juniorisation of their newsrooms is a big concern and that young journalists, specifically those working in a newsroom for the first time, do not have the right attitude to do their duties properly.

Where the community print newspapers differ from the other print publications published by Media24, is the resources they have at their disposal to address these changes and challenges. The perception of community journalists at Boland Media and WP Media is that while they are some of the most profitable publications at Media24, they need to find a way of putting out newspapers every week with too little staff in the newsroom, the most basic of equipment and no spare money to pay freelancers or buy photos of a higher quality. They have to do this while also maintaining a digital presence though they have not been equipped to do so to the same extent publications such as *Die Burger* has. The fact that they feel the income they generate is used to keep other publications, such as *Die Burger*, going makes this situation even more frustrating for them. This has created a negative sentiment towards publications with more staff and better equipment and financial resources. It seems the community journalists feel that though they form part of a bigger organisation, they should not have to suffer even more in order for other journalists to suffer less. It would be interesting to determine why the community newspaper journalists' efforts are not being rewarded if they are indeed helping Media24 stay in business during a time when many print publications have

closed their doors. This resentment may also lead to community newspaper journalists seeking other employment at other publications, because though all the respondents indicated that they enjoy their work, this might not be enough to keep them at their current publications.

It is interesting that though the community print newspapers are part of a company with a digital-first policy, they continue to focus on their print editions and pay little attention to their digital platforms. This is understandable seeing as the community newspapers have been deprived of having their own websites and don't have enough time or staff to manage both print and digital editions. It is also clear that most of the respondents in this study don't know what their publication's digital policy is or what their reward would be for making their digital platforms a bigger priority. This state of affairs seems to be acceptable to Media24, who despite indicating that the structure of the newsrooms at community print newspapers would be altered to incorporate staff and resources dedicated to the publications' digital platforms as was done at *Die Burger*, has failed to do so. Since the community newspapers' content is available free of charge, it does however make sense that the journalists would focus on the edition that generates revenue. Making the community newspapers' readers accustomed to free online content now when they may have to pay for it in the future could have further negative consequences for these publications' circulation. This researcher believes the manner in which publications plan to or have tried to convince readers to pay for online content will continue to receive a good amount of academic attention. It would also be interesting to determine whether readers would be willing to pay for both the print and online editions of a publication, especially if the content is the same as is the case with the community newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media.

The way community print newspapers divide beats between their journalists are unique in the sense that community journalists are responsible for multiple beats, in some cases specific residential areas where the content the journalists have to produce also consist of multiple beats. Some respondents also have to manage multiple editions. Most of the respondents experience this as a positive thing which enables them to become more versatile, though it is clear that having to cover multiple beats take its toll on the journalists because it makes the nature of their work more complex. Some of the respondents insist certain beats such as sport remains a specialist field and needs to be treated as such. The role and importance of specialist reporters at community print newspapers and the media in general could be a topic for further research.

The way the participants in the study choose to source their stories and check facts have not changed much. Though some respondents view social media platforms as useful places to find story ideas and sources, some consider it to be a risky place because of fake news. This researcher believes, however, that fake news is saving journalism, because journalists' fact-checking abilities have never been more necessary. All of the respondents choose to use traditional fact-checking methods such as confirming information with official sources because this increases accuracy and helps to maintain their publications' credibility. The participants also indicated that though they receive UGC on their social media platforms, they choose to generate content themselves in order to ensure that the content they offer their readers fulfil all the standards of good journalism. They also believe that the internet is a noisy place and that part of a journalist's job is to declutter it for their readers.

In general, it seems that though journalists at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media feel the ripple effect of the digitisation of the media, they are

more concerned with doing their work than thinking about what the cause of these changes and challenges are. It is clear from the previous chapter that they have had to endure changes and overcome challenges on many occasions in the past and have learned to adapt themselves accordingly. It is, however, also clear that constantly adapting to changes in order to produce a product that meets their standards, is fatiguing to the community journalists.

Another factor that seems to bare heavy on some of the community journalists' minds, is the notion that some readers as well as some journalists and management members within Media24 perceive community print newspapers as inferior publications which can be demotivating and damaging to community journalists' motivation and perhaps their mental health. Exploring what factors influence a journalists' motivation and mental health and how the state of their mental health affects the quality of their work, could be a topic for future research, especially since newsrooms are inherently stressful environments.

## **6.2. The role of community print newspapers**

The role community print newspapers play in the communities they serve, primarily supplying hyperlocal news to their readers, has not changed according to the responses presented in the previous chapter. Community journalists seem to be determined to perform the various roles their readers expect them to as well as the roles traditionally associated with working at a community print journalist to the best of their abilities. The reason why they are so committed to performing these various roles well, is because they realise that the existence of their publications depends the continued support and loyalty from their readers.

Respondents have noted that journalists at other publications have adopted the same approach and are also trying to provide content that speaks to a certain group of community.

Journalists becoming more involved with their publications' advertisements is a clear indication that everyone is expected to contribute towards the generation of income. Most of the journalists seem to accept this because they understand that the income generated through their publications' advertisements is the lifeblood of a print newspaper and ultimately the thing that pays their salaries and keep their doors open.

The researcher notes that the journalists who participated in this study feel they are not getting sufficient compensation or recognition for the various roles they are expected to perform. Though most of them are willing to continue to do so because they are passionate about their jobs, they may reach a point where they become fed up and leave.

### **6.3. Functioning in an online environment**

The fact that community print newspapers at Boland Media and WP Media have been left to focus on what they deem to be their most important product, their print editions, while most other publications are trying to strengthen their digital offering, is an indication of the unique manner in which community newspapers function. Their main priority is not keeping up with the digitisation of the media, but rather putting their efforts and energy into the print product their readers want. Community journalists seem very aware of the fact that their readers have made a conscious decision to buy their product instead of another newspaper and in some cases has to decide between buying food or buying their local community newspaper.

Community journalists are guided by what their readers want rather than what Media24 expects of them.

The inconsistent manner in which Media24 applies its digital-first policy, its general approach to change management within the company as well as the consequences thereof, could be a fruitful topic for further research. The way other media companies have approached adapting their newsrooms to function in an increasingly digital media landscape could also be a topic for further research.

The use of social media platforms has provided the respondents with new methods of interacting with their readers, but most of them seem either cautious or disillusioned about doing so. The readers who do choose to participate on the community newspapers social platforms, seem to be more vocal and in some cases more abusive towards the community newspapers. In other cases, they seem reluctant to participate on these platforms. The extent to which South African community print newspapers are active on their social media platforms, the way readers of community print newspapers act on social media platforms and the way these publications manage it could be a possible topic for further research. The impact of UGC on dialogues, public perception and public opinion could also be a topic for further research.

One of the big problems for some of the respondents in this study, is maintaining their publication's brand identity while functioning in a bigger ecosystem such as Netwerk24 and the confusion it causes with readers. The fact that the respondents from *District Mail* indicated that they have to put their largely English articles on Netwerk24, which is an Afrikaans news website, has the potential to be a particularly confusing situation for their



readers. Research on the strategies publications follow to maintain their identity on various platforms, particularly if they have to share these platforms with other publications, is a possible topic for further research.

#### **6.4. The quality of community print newspapers**

The previous chapter indicates that the biggest priority for journalists working at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Newspaper is the quality of their publications. Though they have too few staff and limited resources, they find ways to ensure that the newspapers they put out every week are worth every cent their readers pay for it and that people will continue to buy their publications if they maintain a high quality st. They also try to cater for their readers' preferences when it comes to the content of their newspapers. The only changes to the type of content noted in the previous chapter, is a preference for softer news and more features, because the respondents believe this is what their readers enjoy. It could be a worthwhile academic endeavour to establish whether their readers prefer softer news and whether the readers of other news publications also prefer softer news.

One of the respondents indicated that cultural factors such as the gender and race of journalists in the newsroom shapes the type of content published in her publication. This is a topic which lends itself to further research.

Journalists at community print newspapers are in an excellent position to write investigative pieces because they are well-connected in their communities and readers trust them with their stories and information. It is sad that the respondents indicated that they do not have enough staff or time to research and write such pieces. If journalists at weekly publications do not

have time for investigative journalism, the situation must be particularly dire for journalists working at daily publications. The researcher proposes further research on the current state of investigative journalism in South Africa, in particular what challenges it faces and what the consequences of these challenges are to the people of South Africa.

Though respondents indicated that they sometimes struggle to find space for all the news their communities generate every week, space does not seem to be an issue. The fact that Boland Media and WP Media divide the amount of available space equally between editorial content and advertisements serves as an indication that though advertisements generate income, the companies realise that editorial content is the thing that sells their products.

A number of the respondents referred to the fact that the cameras they use do not enable them to take photos of a high enough quality. They believe this is important, because the quality of the photos play a big role in the overall quality of their publications. The researcher proposes further research on what role other journalists believe the quality of photographs play in the quality of the publications and what role the quality of photographs play in the success of their publications.

## **6.5. The future of community print newspapers**

It is comforting that though they face many changes and challenges in their work environment, the journalists working at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media are positive about the future of community newspapers. The previous chapter indicated that communities not only stand to lose their prime source of local news if the local community newspaper has to close its doors, but also their only real platform in the

broader media industry. Because they perform such important roles in their communities, it is important to identify strategies to ensure the survival of community newspapers and make them a worthwhile place for journalists to work.

The researcher believes the respondents' passion for their work and communities is what will ultimately keep them afloat. The role journalists' passion for their work plays in the success of their publication and the journalism field in general could be a topic for further research.

The researcher also believes further changes and challenges will inevitably present themselves again in the future and the journalists will have to adapt to their circumstances again. Generating revenue and finding alternative revenue streams in order to remain profitable will arguably remain the biggest challenge. Some of the participants indicated that their publications have already attempted to do so, such as the production of supplements and other products for clients or the hosting of events which generate revenue. The success of these endeavours, however, depend on having enough time and staff available to produce the products or host the events. The quality of these products and events should also be held to the same high standards as the quality of the content the journalists produce.

Further research on ways publications can use their available resources to generate more revenue could not only contribute to the existing body of academic work, but also help to ensure the future of many publications.

## 6.6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to research the changes and challenges journalists at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media experience in their newsrooms. In order to do so, the researcher interviewed journalists from these publications to explore their experiences, opinions and perceptions on the general changes and challenges these journalists experience in their newsrooms, how they perceive changes to and challenges with regard to the role their publications perform in the communities they serve, the changes and challenges they face with regard to functioning in an online environment and how they feel about the future of community print newspapers.

These findings were explored using a phenomenological approach as theoretical framework in order to study the respondents' experiences. A qualitative research method, namely interviews, was used in order to gain insight into the experiences of journalists at community print newspapers published by Boland Media and WP Media. Through in-depth interviews with nine respondents, the researcher has been able to establish the changes and challenges at these publications.

The researcher found that while the respondents have a positive attitude towards change and remain positive about the future of community newspapers, they face many challenges which impede their ability to do their work to the high standards they set for themselves as well as make use of the new opportunities available to them, such as expanding their digital presence. Specific strategies on how to manage and overcome the changes and challenges journalists at Boland Media and WP Media experience need to be developed in order for these community

newspapers to not only survive but thrive and also fulfil the many roles they play in the communities they serve.

## **6.7. Contribution, limitations and recommendations**

The researcher hopes that this study will contribute to the existing body of academic research in South African journalism studies, specifically community journalism which the researcher believes is a field which has not received sufficient academic attention. The main contribution of this study is insight into the experiences of journalists working at community print newspapers in South Africa. The researcher hopes this insight will lead to an improvement in the state of affairs at community print newspapers in South Africa.

The researcher is cognisant of the limitations of this study, most notably the small sample size of respondents, the subjective nature of their responses and the preconceived perceptions the researcher has of changes and challenges at community print newspapers. The respondents, however, offered similar responses during the various interviews indicating a point of data saturation. The goal of the study was to explore the subjective experiences of the participants in order to understand the changes and challenges they experience. It could be considered a limitation that this study does not provide in-depth insights into the specific changes and challenges experienced by the participants. The goal of this study was, however, not to provide in-depth insights into these changes and challenges, but rather a broad overview and exploration of how the participants experience and perceive these changes and challenges.

The researcher made many recommendations for further study in this chapter. The researcher would also recommend conducting similar research at other community print newspapers published in South Africa in order to validate the insights offered in this study. The researcher also recommends conducting a comparative study involving community journalism of other countries in order to determine how community journalists in these countries have experienced the changes and challenges as compared to the South African community journalists.

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### **List of participants**

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## **Addendum A: Interview guide**

Interview guide

Respondent name:

Publication:

Date:

The purpose of this interview is to gather detailed information which will help the researcher to answer the following key research question: What changes and challenges have journalists experienced at Boland Media and WP Newspapers' community print newspapers? In order to answer specific aspects of the main research question, the following questions will be used to gain insight into how these changes and challenges have affected community newspapers at Boland Media and WP Newspapers:

1. How do you perceive your work environment? Is it an environment that has stayed the same, or is it an environment within which you have experienced changes?
2. How have you experienced changes and challenges in the newsroom, specifically in terms of:
  - The way journalists are expected to function and perform various roles;
  - The use of beats;
  - The number of staff members on the editorial team;
  - The equipment and financial resources available to the editorial team;
  - The way stories are sourced;
  - The types of stories covered in your print publication and how they are covered.

3. What have been the catalysts for these changes?
4. Has it been necessary for you to adjust yourself to changes in your work environment? If so, how?
5. Does your publication differentiate between editorial and advertising space?
6. Have you experienced any changes in:
  - The amount of editorial space available to journalists at your print publication;
  - The number of advertorials and other forms of paid-for content which have to be included in editorial space.
7. Has the digitisation of the media altered your work environment and/or the way you function in it?
8. What challenges and changes associated with the digitisation of the media have you experienced in terms of:
  - The way stories are sourced;
  - The way facts are checked;
  - The management of your publication in both its print and digital format;
  - Keeping up with the digital news cycle while focusing on a weekly print publication.
9. Are these challenges new challenges, or challenges that have always been present?

10. Has Media24's digital policies affected community print newspapers' ability to maintain their brand identity, both in print and digital spaces? If so, how?

11. Has it become more difficult to maintain your publications' credibility? Why (not)?

12. Have you experienced any changes to your print publication's relationship with its readers?

13. How have you experienced changes to your print publication's relationship with its readers, specifically in terms of:

- The way your readers communicate with you;
- The amount and type of feedback you get from your readers;
- Your print publication's ability to perform its various roles in the communities it serves.

14. What are your views on:

- The future of your publication and other community print newspapers;
- The reason why journalists choose to work at community print newspapers;
- The possible reasons why journalists would choose to leave community print newspapers;
- How communities would be affected if community print newspapers ceased to exist.